

*Antevive*

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**by**

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## Abstract

The following text is an excerpt from the [unfinished] novel *Antevive*, my most recent and best executed writing endeavor. The concept of a sentient planet battling the same moral dilemmas as humans do—and the resulting conflicts from clashing decisions between species—was both exciting and challenging to develop. What started out as a small prompt for a writing competition soon grew and evolved into hundreds of hours and pages worth of research, creative writing, and philosophical considerations. Addax Pereski, the novel's antagonist, faces the same moral questions that we must often consider in our world today, and she learns—as we all must—that her world is not governed by black and white rules of “right and wrong” or “good and evil,” but a jumble of grey beings just trying to survive. In her quest for knowledge and utopia, she battles with the elements, other humans, and even her own conscience. This excerpt is from the early days of the novel's creation and a salute to the hurdles I have overcome to get where I am today.

## Acknowledgements

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Special thanks to my wonderful husband, Nick, for picking up the slack around the house and being an amazing father to our son while I was locked away, writing, for hours at a time. I couldn't have done it without him, my sister Mary, my best friend Sara, and the countless others who held me accountable throughout the years.

### **Process Analysis Statement (Author's Statement)**

I was first introduced to the concept of world building by my roommate, Lauren, during my first semester at Ball State University. It was the last week of October, and Lauren spent every waking moment in the room at her desk; she was researching; typing; printing, cutting out, and pinning up miniature outfits and medieval weapons to that random board hanging down from her lofted, twin-sized bed. While I had grown and matured over my eighteen years on Earth, I had always been—and likely always will be—two things: nosey and impulsive.

So one evening, when I walked in on her mulling over the placement of a burgundy overcoat on her board, I finally asked, “What, exactly, is all of this for?”

Without looking up, she replied, “Nanowrimo.”

Not knowing when to quit, I pressed further. “Nano-what-o?” I asked.

Her explanation reignited some inner spark that had been all but stamped out by various unfortunate events throughout my childhood, aided by the realization we all face at some point in our lives that not one of us is more special than the others, only more lucky. It is also what I choose to blame for my less-than-ideal grade point average at the end of my first semester of college.

Nanowrimo is a month-long writing event during which people from all fifty United States willingly neglect their health, personal hygiene, and all other adult responsibilities in order to “compete” for a virtual sticker on an online profile. It’s advertised as a “fun, seat-of-your-pants approach to creative writing.” Regardless of its description, the goal of Nanowrimo is to write a 50,000 word manuscript between November 1 and November 30. Some people begin a novel from scratch, some choose to write lots of short stories or a series of poems. No matter in



what format the words end up on the page, an average of 1,613 of them need to materialize each day in order to reach that goal.

On November 1, 2013—with no plan and no idea what I was getting myself into—I sat down at my desk after class and signed up for Nanowrimo. The first day, I felt a little guilty for sprinting through my psychology assignment in order to work through the magical elements of some poorly-constructed fictional universe. By the end of the first week, I was obsessed. Literal sweat and tears resulted from my daily attempt to power through writer's block and a lackadaisical research collection in order to pull a few hundred more words from the reaches of who-knows-where. I put off real homework assignments, eating, sleeping, and socializing for thirty whole days, striving to complete my novel and achieve my life-long dream of becoming a published author. The only thing that kept me going was the knowledge that, at the end of the month, I would have a novel to show for all this hard work.

On November 30, 2013—exhausted, hungry, and falling behind in school for the first time in my life—I sat down at my desk after skipping class again and stared at the virtual sticker next to my screen name on the Nanowrimo website. *WINNER*, it said. I was so proud of that damn sticker. I told everyone I had been avoiding all month about my accomplishment—50,000 words in thirty days. It felt good.

On December 1, 2013 I decided to go back and look at what I wrote and instantly regretted it. The novel was absolute garbage. Its working title: *They Sang of Forever*. Its plot: unoriginal, poorly constructed, and incomplete. The characters were so underdeveloped I'm surprised I even gave them names, and there was a giant chunk of storyline that I had decided to just skip right over. I felt cheated. This wasn't a publishable novel; and isn't that what the website had promised me?



It turns out, you can't write a novel in a month. Damn.

I didn't think of Nanowrimo or anything else related to my writing until October of my sophomore year. I was sitting in the lobby of Dehority, being a good Honors student and completing some assignment for a class I no longer remember taking, when one of Lauren's friends from home sat at the table next to mine. Silently, he pulled out his laptop and a notebook and turned to the first page. At the top, he wrote simply, "PLOT." I should have turned away and let it be, but Lord knows—as does anyone else who claims to know me—that “letting it be” has never been my forte.

Instead, realizing—or maybe presuming—what he was doing, I turned in my chair and asked, “Do you do Nanowrimo too?” Curse it all.

He paused, seemingly embarrassed. “Yes,” he answered sheepishly.

“But, it's still a month away.” I pressed, “Isn't it cheating to start so early?”

“You're allowed to plan,” he retorted. “Your novel is going to come out way better if you do.”

Curious, I questioned him further. “So, what, you make an outline for an entire novel to try and keep it all straight?”

He pulled a second notebook from his satchel and slid it toward me. I moved over to sit across from him at his table, abandoning my work behind me.

“There's a lot more to world building than just the plot. You have to have characters, setting, conflict and resolution,” he explained. “You can't tell what your characters are going to do until you know why and how they would do it, what encourages or discourages them from doing it, and a reason why they should or shouldn't do it in the first place. You have to know their hopes and dreams, what drives them, their strengths and weaknesses; you have to know

where they come from and where they are going. And then—once you know as much about them as you can—that’s when you tell their stories.”

Lord help me, will I ever learn?

I immediately pulled out a blank notebook and began to brainstorm. That day, Casey became my writing buddy and unwitting competitor for the 2014 Nanowrimo challenge. That day, my favorite concept yet was born. It had many working titles as October and then November came and went, but I finally settled on the name *Antevive*. The name is pulled loosely from the French terms meaning “Living Plant,” and the details of the novel were riddled with hidden meaning and complex imagery—at least, it seemed that way to me.

*Antevive*, at its surface, is a coming-of-age story for a young girl, Addax, and two even younger children, Juniper and Brier, who she promises to protect during her journey. She travels from her home village across an entire continent in search of truth and meaning and all sorts of other noble and boring things. Her adversaries include not only the natural elements and human oppressors, but her own conscious as she struggles to understand the difference between what is right and what is necessary.

The fun part for me, though, was building *Antevive* herself. Forever fascinated by the concept of a sentient planet, I made *Antevive*—a tiny planet on the verge of destruction at the hands of none other than human beings themselves—as alive as Addax. While at war with her own conscious about matters concerning the humans, a new foe emerges as a virus that threatens to annihilate everything on the planet and ultimately kill *Antevive* as a result. Caught, in the most bizarre sense, against a rock and a hard place, self-preservation ultimately wins out and the readers—ideally—have to question their preconceived notions of “right” and “wrong” and “good” and “evil” while processing *Antevive*’s ultimate decision.

Naming characters—and antagonistic viruses—is one of my favorite parts of the world-building process. Deciding on a theme, doing research to make sure that theme will hold true for an entire novel, realizing you're screwed after twelve names and having to start over, and then saying "Screw it!" and breaking the rules to make them work; it is so easy to feel accomplished after deciding on names. *Antevive*, as mentioned previously, is loosely based on the French language; this is because I wanted something that could be somewhat easily deciphered by readers but still clever enough to make my readers smile as they realize what I had done.

I obviously thought very highly of myself as a future novelist, imagining having readers who cared enough to try and uncover any sort of hidden meaning in my work. Nevertheless, I realized soon enough that I was ultimately doing it for me; I have always loved riddles and wanted to write the type of novel that I would be willing and eager to read.

The virus remains unnamed, even now; but *Antevive*'s answer to containing the virus is called *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*. In our world, it is commonly known as the "Zombie Fungus," and it is as strange and nasty as it sounds. *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis* grows on tropical forest floors. Its spores float up to regions inhabited by ants, infect the poor insects' bodies, and literally take control of their minds. Under the command of the Zombie Fungus, infected ants climb back down to the dark and damp forest floors where they obediently die, their bodies providing nutrients for the new fungus.

In *Antevive*, the Zombie Fungus isn't a fungus at all, but a plentiful plant known as Filbert by the humans. Filbert, in our universe, is nothing more than a common hazelnut. I still pat myself on the back every once in a while for putting such a harmless name and connotation on the substance that mindshackles the entire human population of my made-up planet. The best part, though, is that the humans have no idea that the plant affects them in such a way. Each



village utilizes Filbert in their own unique way: some eat it for nourishment, others for pleasure. But to them, whether they recognize it or not, Filbert is the strongest of drugs. It grows only within the boundaries of human villages, preventing them from venturing too far out into the Wilds, lest they should come across another village and start learning too much. For those who are both independent of the effects of Filbert and courageous enough to venture outside the village, beasts of outrageous description are waiting to reward them for their stupidity with a demise much swifter than one caused by old age, the attacking virus, or the withdrawal effects of the Filbert plant. When all else fails to kill a human, the Oppressors—human themselves and willing zombies—are there to reintroduce their brethren to a life of obedience.

The system works well enough for *Antevive*, who would rather have the humans gone altogether (she could do it easily enough) if she didn't need them as hosts for the virus that would otherwise devour her. So she survives on the edge of the cruelest of ironies: enslaving others and offering sacrifices—giving just enough and never taking too much—just to ensure she doesn't suffer a similar fate.

This is the world into which Addax and the others are born. As she learns more, she understands less. She questions the value of one life over another, and tries to deny the truth that her world isn't ruled by black-and-white values. She lives with the consequences of her actions as she realizes too late that there is no such thing as good and evil or right and wrong, only beings trying to survive.

At least, these are the things that would happen if I had ever gotten around to writing their stories. Sadly, *Antevive* hardly made it past the planning stages before November 30<sup>th</sup> came and went and I had to return to the “real” world of GPAs and weekend job applications. Since my first Nanowrimo, I had sworn off men, taken to rock climbing as a full-time hobby, decided

to give men one last chance, and even met one particular man's entire family at his brother's wedding. Even still, I didn't completely forget about *Antevive*. I wrote barely 20,000 words in two months, but I was damn proud of those words. I had filled half a college-ruled notebook with biographies of characters, villages, and creatures; I had drawn and labeled a map of the planet with names of villages, mountains, rivers, and oceans; I had even decided to turn my creation into my senior thesis project.

Casey brought it up to me one day while sitting at our normal table.

"Did you know you can do a creative project for your thesis?" He read from his green packet. "Instead of a research paper, you're allowed to compose a song, develop a portfolio,"

"Write a novel?" I interrupted. "Could you write a novel for your senior thesis?"

He shrugged, "Probably, if you found the right advisor."

I still laugh—not because it's funny—at my next words. "How awesome would it be to be finished with my Senior Thesis by the end of my sophomore year?"

"That would be cool," Casey said noncommittally.

It was all I needed to blindly decide on a topic for my thesis. After all, how hard could it really be to write a novel now that I was fully committed with a real goal in mind? I already had the foundations; all I had to do was write. Right?

It turns out, you can't write a novel in a semester either. Damn. Again.

At the beginning of my junior year, I was working as an Academic Peer Mentor in Studebaker West and living with my best friend from high school, Kimmy. I was in a committed relationship with the aforementioned man, Nicholas, and I was successfully struggling through my third year of college. The weightiest topic of discussion that ever arose during the first few



months was whether we should get engaged this year—when Nick graduated—or the next, after I had graduated.

Nick and I slept together for the first time a year after we began dating and a good while after establishing some very clear guidelines. Doctors told me I wouldn't have children on my own (without medical interventions), but that didn't stop me from putting Nick through some intensive interrogations; I had to be sure of his intentions as well as his willingness to accept whatever consequences arose from our recklessness. We were young and happy—and neither of us had any prior experience with which to compare each other—so we made the most of our time together. We made lots of plans for after graduation: to travel, work our dream jobs, find a house, adopt a dog.

I do not remember who told me that God laughs whenever we try to make plans, but I kick myself every day for believing that was just a joke.

By November of the same year, I was still an APM in Stu West; I was still living with Kimmy; I was still enjoying my classes; and, I was still madly in love with the man of my dreams. I had even begun the intensive process of applying for an internship with the FBI—a major accomplishment for me. Unfortunately, I was also wasting away. For nearly two months I had been vomiting multiple times a day and had limited my diet to nothing but rice and vegetables, as they were all I could stomach. I was losing weight and losing my mind trying to figure out what was happening to me. With all the stress of the FBI internship and my mysterious illness, Nick and I had barely seen each other in weeks, and my thesis was all but forgotten. The walk to and from class drained me to the point that I could hardly keep my eyes open in order to complete assignments. Finally, I caved and visited the campus health center. After explaining to the doctor how lucky it was that I hadn't vomited all over his waiting room, he prescribed me



two unpronounceable medications; one was to coat my stomach to prevent the development of an ulcer, and the other was supposed to make my food stay where I put it. That night, I took the first dose of my miracle pills and promptly threw them back up into my dorm room trashcan. Frustrated—and sure I was going to die of dehydration—I climbed into bed and tried to fall asleep.

I awoke the next morning early, close to 5 or 6am, for no discernable reason. Kimmy was still asleep across the room, but all I could do was stare at the ceiling and wonder if I would be able to make it to class after a night of no food and no sleep. Then, out of nowhere, the most invasive thought seeped into my brain and wouldn't leave me alone no matter how hard I tried to think of something else. I cannot even begin to explain why, but that morning before the sun even rose, I hopped down to the floor, sifted through the green tote of miscellaneous junk hiding under my bed, and quietly made my way to the communal floor bathrooms. I locked myself in a stall, ripped open the pink package, and peed on the damn stick. As I waited the instructed three minutes, I kicked myself for wasting such an expensive test. There was no way I was pregnant; even if the doctors were wrong, it had been months since Nick and I had participated in any sort of baby-making activities.

“Oh well,” I said out loud to the stall door. “At least I’ve ruled something out and now we can really start looking into what’s wrong with me.”

When the three minutes was up, I grabbed the pregnancy test and prepared to throw it in the receptacle. Conscience clear. Except, when I glanced down at the result, a nice clear YES was staring back up at me.

It would take ten pages to describe what I felt in that moment, but all I could do to express them was smile. Then, I let out a very audible, “Oh my God,” and walked back to the

room, test in hand. I remember trying to make a plan while my head was spinning and my mind was racing. I remember convincing myself to go back to sleep until the health center opened and then to go get a blood test; nothing was certain until then.

Of course, I did not fall back asleep, but rather stared at the ceiling for two more hours until the health center opened. At exactly 8:00am, ten minutes after Kimmy left for her morning class, I called the health center.

“Hi, do you do blood tests?”

“Yes,” the nurse answered. “We can do a blood test for you this morning. What time do you think you will be able to come in?”

Before she finished the question I was out the door. “I’m on my way now. Be there in five.”

“Okay, then we will have it all ready for you when you get here,” she responded. “Just come on back to the nurse’s station, don’t worry about stopping at the front desk.”

God bless you, sweet nurse.

I dropped the bomb on Kimmy that afternoon when she got back from class. I walked in the room and found her sitting on her bed, playing Candy Crush.

“So, I figured out why I’ve been so sick.” I casually mentioned, dropping my backpack to the floor.

“Oh, yeah?” She questioned halfheartedly. “What is it?”

After a moment of silence, she looked up from her game to see me holding the test from that morning. She glanced at it, then to me, then back to the test. When it finally clicked in her brain, her eyes got huge as she silently moved the computer from her lap and embraced me in a tight hug.

“Oh my God,” she said.

“I know,” I answered.

I dropped the bomb on Nick that same afternoon, after Kimmy had left but before Nick could ask me to play Ping-Pong. At first, he thought I was playing a cruel joke. I don’t blame him, on account that I was smiling and giggling the entire time that I was trying to get the words out (I react completely inappropriately to high intensity situations, and often laugh when I should cry, or vice versa). Eventually, I just had to show him the test to convince him I wasn’t lying. He responded by laying face down on my bed for what felt like an eternity before I finally spoke up.

“Look, I know this is a lot, and I know you need time to process,” I said. “But I really think we should talk through this together.”

“I know,” he answered.

That night at dinner, I got the phone call that confirmed the news. Shockingly, the blood test showed that I was close to 8 weeks along already, and the nurse urged me to find prenatal care immediately. The next six months were a whirlwind, to put it mildly; but seeing our baby and hearing the tiny heartbeat during the first ultrasound is what truly changed my perspective on my entire life.

By December, I was still sick and tired and working my literal ass off, but I also had a reason to succeed—other than the approval of my tightly wound parents. My motivation completely shifted, as did Nick’s. He decided to go to graduate school (CICS) after graduation in order to give us the best chance of financial stability. He accepted an internship with Eli Lilly, learned everything he could about what it meant to be a parent, and became the most amazing support person in my life. We got engaged shortly after Christmas, and we found out that our



little one was sporting both X and Y chromosomes. Nick was a bit disappointed—he was hoping for a girl—but I was over the moon.

I worked harder than ever over the next semester. I spoke with professors to make sure I continued to meet their expectations. I developed impactful friendships and mentorships with people who remain important to us to this day. I did my job as well as any of my colleagues, and I ended the semester with my first 4.0 GPA.

My thesis evolved and changed as much as my unborn child did that semester. What started out as an attempt to write a novel had developed into a full anthropological study of this world I had created in my head. It was no longer just about telling the story, but allowing people to see why the story existed in the first place. My advisor, Dr. Brent Blackwell (referred to affectionately—yet respectfully—as “Doc”), was just as excited about the idea as I was. We rewrote my proposal to include pieces of work stemming from multiple disciplines that peaked my interest.

The final plan required me to reach far beyond my comfort zone and to do far more research than I had ever done for a simple term paper. There was to be a detailed outline of all of Antevive’s villages, a National Geographic-style article written from the perspective of one of the explorers, a field journal kept by the same explorer, a scientific study of Filbert, a catalogue of artifacts found during the main characters’ travels, a map of the planet, and a sample of the novel that started it all. I had to learn to write as a novelist, a cartographer, an auctioneer, a scientist, and a journalist. It was all so exciting!

It was all so ... so hard.

It turns out, growing a human takes a lot of work; and there’s no way to put it off until the next day or decide how much of your energy to give and save for other things like a job or

school. Nevertheless, I was very committed to my new thesis, and I got a decent amount written for the novel that semester. Doc and I agreed, though, that I should focus on my other responsibilities that semester and use my “time off” during the summer to get a head start on my thesis for senior year. Obviously, neither Doc nor I truly knew what was in store for me that summer.

On June 28, 2016 at 5:29am, after 29.5 hours of relatively complication-free labor, Emmett Davis Griggs was put on my chest. He was pink and screaming and had a full head of dark hair. His daddy cried silently while I stared in disbelief. I was afraid to touch him, in case it had all been a terribly long and vivid dream from which I could wake at any moment.

“You look like a monkey!” I stated loudly, once I had found my voice again.

Yes, those were the first words to my son, my miracle baby. In my defense, he *did* look like a monkey. He had jet-black hair, as I mentioned, but it wasn’t just on his head. It was on the tops of his arms and in a small patch on his lower back. It all fell off, as we were told it would, but he still remains our “Little Man” even to this day. Everyone told us he was beautiful, and we never questioned their bias. It was love at first sight, and we both knew that nothing could ever be more important to us than this tiny human lying, now sleeping, on my chest.

It turns out, we were right.

The summer flew by. Emmett had hardly learned our faces before it was time to move back to Muncie, find babysitters to watch him while we were in class or at work, and speak with professors about the logistics of being a student parent. For the first time in my entire life, I dreaded returning to school at the end of Summer Break. I remember sitting on the couch, watching Emmett sleep in my arms after battling mastitis and six weeks of sleepless nights. I

remember telling Nick that I didn't want to go back, that I couldn't imagine myself ever wanting to do anything but sit and stare at the miracle in my arms.

"It's gonna be really hard," I said, not looking up.

"I know," he answered.

Then he sat and stared with me until life rudely interrupted and ordered us to move.

From the moment classes began in the Fall of 2016, I felt like I was drowning. All the motivation from the previous year had vanished and was replaced by overwhelming feelings of inadequacy and guilt. Instead of completing assignments, I planned our wedding. Instead of attending lectures, I taught Emmett to roll over and sit up. Instead of using down time to study for exams, I used it to watch Netflix and pretend I wasn't stressed beyond my limits. My grades reflected these shifting priorities, and I feared that I was ruining my chances of graduating with the honors for which I had worked so hard my entire college career. I no longer strived to see As on my transcript.

However, I still wanted that damn silver medal to wear around my neck during graduation. So I made a single goal for Senior year: graduate Magna Cum Laude. I told everyone of this goal to ensure some amount of accountability, and I told my fiancé because I knew he wouldn't let me forget.

Everything that used to define me slowly faded away that first semester. I no longer had the desire to read, write, rock climb, or create. I no longer wanted to hang out with friends or go to class or even eat. I could barely stand to touch my fiancé, and it felt as if my son was a stranger's child. I fell behind on my thesis; I missed deadline after deadline and then just stopped trying altogether. I was able to hold my grades at an acceptable level only by the grace of God, but every day was more draining. I told myself—and everyone who asked—that I was stressed,



suffering from good ol' Senioritis, and just needed a break. I would be re-motivated and ready to go after Christmas; I always was. Except, this time, I wasn't.

At some point, early in to my last semester at Ball State, everything turned upside down. One day, while sitting through Dr. Lawson's Developmental Psychology lecture, I came to the startling conclusion that I was very ill—not physically, but mentally. A graduate student had come to speak with the class about the School Psychology Masters program, and about halfway through her spiel I realized two things: I had completely neglected to plan for life after graduation, and a healthy Peyton would be stoked at the idea of that sort of grad program. But I wasn't.

After class that day, I followed Dr. Lawson back to her office and hesitantly asked for some life advice. Ten minutes later, I was unsuccessfully attempting to choke back tears as I tried to explain everything I had experienced that year.

I tried to explain the feelings of panic every time the thought of my thesis entered my mind. I tried to explain how crippling the thought was of sitting down at my computer and trying to write. I tried to explain how it felt like being punched in the gut and having a thousand voices screaming at me to turn and run away; how I would literally sweat and find comfort only in curling up into the tightest ball I could manage to try to forget how behind I was. I tried to explain the guilt and anger that kept growing. Why couldn't I just sit down and work? Why was I so lazy, distracted, and unmotivated? Why was I so worthless? Why was I failing? Why didn't I care?

I finally recognized that the amount of anxiety and hopelessness that I was feeling wasn't normal, but I couldn't yet admit that I needed to tell anyone about it. That didn't occur to me until I hit the lowest point of the entire year, when I realized I had stopped caring about my son. I

still fed him and changed his diapers; I still told him I loved him and made sure he stayed safe. But when he smiled, I didn't return the gesture; when he laughed, I felt no joy. At the very worst, I felt no anger, no frustration, and no sadness. As Elie Wiesel so famously said, the opposite of love is not hatred, but indifference. When he cried out in the middle of the day because of hunger or pain or loneliness, I was indifferent. I remember sitting on the couch, staring at the wall, listening to my baby boy scream in the other room, and not caring why he was upset. I remember thinking that I could sit there all day and let him scream and it wouldn't have fazed me one little bit. In that moment, I remember thinking that I should feel bad for letting my hopeless infant cry; but I didn't feel bad. I felt nothing. In that moment, logic finally won out; I knew that something was seriously wrong, and that—for Emmett's sake—I needed to get help.

Sometime later, just a few months before graduation, I was officially diagnosed with Postpartum Depression (PPD). I told no one besides Nick and my professors. I know now how blessed I was to have professors who were so incredibly supportive and understanding. Everyone worked with me to make the last few months of the semester bearable. Doc had been working with me for a while, trying to find new ways to encourage me to make just a single deadline. We broke up the thesis into tiny, more manageable parts. We met more often for pep talks and unofficial therapy sessions. He worked so hard to help me finish on time. He was the best thesis advisor; I was the worst thesis writer.

The unfortunate truth about mood disorders is that they don't just magically disappear once you give them a name. Being aware of why I felt hopeless and worthless didn't make it any easier to get out of bed or change my baby's diaper. Knowing I had an imbalance of chemicals in my brain didn't give me the courage I needed to sit down and write a paper. In fact, it even made some parts of my life more challenging.



My fiancé never truly understood what PPD was. He never stopped believing that I was just making excuses or being lazy. He never stopped reminding me that I was failing. In his defense, I asked for the reminders; back when I thought I was simply unmotivated, I asked him to hold me accountable. But once I learned what I was dealing with, those daily reminders were no longer helpful, but repetitive punches in the gut. They were no longer reminders to work hard, but reminders that I had no control over what was happening in my brain. They were reminders that I was quickly losing my sense of self, and all I could do was sit back and hope the tiny white pills would make me feel something again.

For the entire semester, I felt like I was fighting battles on every front imaginable. I would pull ahead on one front as another closed in behind me. I started to feel again: the familiar warmth of a mother's love when Emmett would smile or coo; the sadness when he would cry out for me in the middle of the night; the butterflies when Nick would pull me close after putting Emmett back to sleep. But as the pleasant and important feelings returned, my anxiety grew with them. I began to imagine terrible things happening to Emmett and Nick while they slept; I started playing out scenarios in my mind in which I ended up dead, alone, or stuck in limbo forever. I pulled farther away from people I loved. My grades continued to drop. My thesis remained untouched.

The rest of the year was a blur of antidepressants and therapy sessions; classes and sleepless nights; guilt over my incomplete thesis and the idea of disappointing every professor and advisor who had ever believed in me. Graduation day arrived, and I walked across the stage with my fellow classmates. Around my neck hung the honor's cords that I hadn't earned and the silver Magna Cum Laude medal that I didn't deserve.



The doctors had told me that I wouldn't feel better right away; that it could take six months or even a year to rewire my brain to feel "normal" again. So I wasn't surprised at my lack of excitement on graduation day. Friends, family, and strangers all cheered and offered congratulations. I smiled for pictures, opened cards, and partook in the obligatory family meal. But I felt no sense of accomplishment for what I had done, only an overwhelming sense of failure. I had never truly failed at anything in my life as greatly as I had failed to complete my Senior Honor's Thesis, and that point in my life—raising a small child, graduating from college, planning a wedding, searching for a job and a house, realizing I no longer had any close friends—was not an ideal time to experience true failure for the first time.

With the warmer weather came a slow but steady improvement in my condition. Nick graduated from CICS, and I felt genuinely proud of him as he crossed the stage. Emmett had his first birthday party, and I didn't have to fake a single smile the entire day. I became a business owner, opened up an in-home daycare, started providing for my family, and felt a real sense of accomplishment for the first time in a long time. We got married on September 23, 2017, and it was absolutely perfect; when Nick and I agreed that the joy of the day was second only to the birth of our son, I felt true happiness and cried from the sheer weight of the realization.

And yet, in the back of my mind, every day at least once a day, was the nagging reminder that I still had a thesis to complete. It all felt so pointless by then! I had graduated, moved on with my life, found bigger and better things to occupy my time! Why should I let something so inconsequential define my self worth? Why should I dwell on the past and let it weigh me down after all the progress I had made?

It turns out, I am really bad at trying to convince myself of things that aren't true.

I knew the thesis was important. I knew that if I didn't finish it that all the hard work I had put in during the last four years would mean so much less. I knew that I was disappointing people—including myself. But I just wanted it to go away!

Nick was worse than unhelpful. He had begun his new job working for Eli Lilly, and his concept of what I did for a living was...lacking, to say the least. He believed that if I could just dedicate 15 minutes each day to my thesis, then it would be done in no time and I would have nothing to stress over. It didn't matter how many times I tried to explain the complexity of creative writing and the amount of brainpower that had to go into the research and development of such a project. He didn't understand that I didn't *have* 15 minutes to spend on a thesis when I had to make his lunch, feed children, do laundry, wash dishes, water plants, pick up toys, change diapers, fold clothes, pick up more toys, sweep, vacuum, mop, entertain children, change more diapers, pick up toys again, talk to parents, pay bills, shower, brush my teeth, brush my hair, buy groceries, pick up groceries, arrange play dates, host play dates, pick up toys after play dates, run to the bank, clean vomit out of a car seat, answer emails, cook dinner, give the kid a bath, chase a naked kid around the house, pick up even more toys, and somehow get everyone to sleep without committing homicide. He didn't understand that the 15 "extra" minutes I had once every few days was spent attempting some new exercise plan "for busy moms" that had obviously not been developed by a busy mom. He never truly grasped the idea that, even if I had *two hours* to spend on my thesis each day, I still would barely make a dent. Regardless of my attempts to convince him otherwise, Nick still insisted every few days that "15 minutes at a time" would make a difference.

Eventually, I gave up. I refused to feel guilty about my failure any longer and officially decided to scrap my thesis. I resigned myself to the fact that I was a mediocre individual and that



I would just have to come to terms with my plain, non-honors Bachelor's degree. I would never get that metaphorical "WINNER" sticker that would show the world (read: anyone who happens to see the wall of my home office) that I was above average. The only thing that was left to do was tell my advisor.

I agonized for weeks over telling Doc that I was giving up. I knew I would be a disappointment, and I also sort of figured it would look bad on him to have a student who just quit. But when I finally gathered the courage to hit "Send" on that final email, I felt the weight of a thousand suns lift from my shoulders.

"I'm free!" I thought to myself, way too excitedly. I knew it was wrong to feel so relieved, but I didn't have the time or energy to care. I had a daycare to run, a child to raise, a husband to love, and a whole lot of new friends to make. I had the challenging task of rebuilding my identity and finding new ways to enjoy my crazy, amazing life.

It turns out, I learned absolutely nothing in my four years of college.

On November 2, 2017, Dr. Brent Blackwell responded to my email.

"I understand." He began. "Life definitely got in the way."

He then went on to say—in not so many words—that he was not going to let me quit that easily, that I had already done plenty of work to compile a decent creative project even if it wasn't as big and intricate as the original idea, and that he wasn't disappointed "in the slightest."

Feeling both touched and incredibly frustrated, I remember literally slamming my head down on my dining room table and followed it up with an audible groan.

Nick looked over from the couch and hesitantly asked, "Is everything alright, Dear?"

"My thesis advisor won't let me quit," I grumbled.



“That’s a good thing.” He turned back around to watch whatever football game happened to be on at the time; I can still imagine the smug grin on his dumb, pretty face.

“Ugh, I know!” I stuck out my tongue, turned back to the computer to respond to Doc, and it all began again.

A couple weeks after rededicating myself to this godforsaken project, I sent Doc the first few pages of this very document. After explaining that the section of the novel I had written was crap and probably not even worth turning in, I ended the email by admitting that, although I kind of hated him for refusing to give up on me, I was secretly glad that he was making me finish. He simply edited what I had sent him, agreed upon the next deadline, and insisted I include the undeniable fact that he’s the reason I will be ringing the coveted Honor’s House bell sometime very soon.

## **Final Thoughts**

I've come a long way since my first Nanowrimo, but sometimes it feels as if I haven't changed at all. Despite all that I've accomplished, I'm still struggling with a sense of failure; part of that stems from my trying to come to terms with my new identity. I am no longer an independent, rock-climbing feminist who dreams of working for the FBI. Now, I am a wife, mother, and business owner who craves adult interaction and wishes she could remember what she likes to do for fun. I am all too often reminded of everything I failed to do in the last four years, and the same questions keep me up at night. Did I make the right decisions? Could I have tried harder and made it work? How much of my failure was out of my control versus me making excuses for myself? For someone who recognizes—and often preaches about—the futility of worrying about the past and things no longer in our control, it is frustrating to wrestle with such thoughts. Regardless, I know I have learned so much from my experiences, and I wouldn't trade the life I have now for anything. Here are a few things I've learned over the last four years:

### **1. My father was right.**

I can't even believe I'm typing these words. My father always used to tell me that I was “burning the candle at both ends” and that I was going to regret trying to do so much. I obviously rolled my eyes at him numerous times for saying such ridiculous things. How could anyone ever regret ambition? It can't be that difficult to have everything you want (\*eye roll\*). Of course, I took on way more than I should have in college and, ultimately, was only able to half-ass everything. Furthermore, I ended up completely neglecting my mental health in the process. So, it's safe to say that my father was indeed correct about my candle, although I'll likely never admit it to him.

## **2. I value my family (and my passion) over my education.**

These words hurt to type. My education had come before everything in my life before I met Nick and started a family. School was always my safe place; it was always the place where I was good at everything and didn't feel like I had no control over my life. So when I started to realize that my priorities had shifted—that I needed to focus on my son and my relationship and my health—I didn't know how to cope. This is when I realized that I *chose* to put school on the back burner. I could have spent more time on the thesis at the expense of time with Emmett and Nick, but I didn't; I *chose* to put them first. I could have stayed home and we could have survived on one paycheck in order to work on the thesis, but I didn't; I *chose* to pursue my passion for helping children learn and grow. I've learned that, while I still value education very much, there are other things more important in my life right now; and I'm learning to be okay with that.

## **3. I suck at writing for material gain, and I may very well never publish a novel because of it.**

Something of great value that I've learned from this experience is that I am driven by—and firmly believe in—an internal locus of control. I do not believe that the events of the world just happen to me or that I can do nothing to remedy my situation. I feel much more comfortable when I am in control of my actions and when I get to choose whether or not to act on what drives me. Because of this, I am also extremely intrinsically motivated. When I was writing *Antevive* for me, it was all I wanted to do; when I had to do it for someone else, I despised it. Of course, writing a publishable novel requires a lot of answering to other people, meeting deadlines, and adhering to strict standards; all of these things seem like impossible conditions for a creative mind to work under. I still love to write, but I realize that publishing a novel will have to take



place at a different time in my life, when I am able to shift my priorities once again; and I'm learning to be okay with that as well.

#### **4. Your dreams are allowed to change; that's not failure, it's growth.**

I hope this is true, because I'm still trying to convince myself that I can succeed as a human being without hiking the Appalachian Trail or owning a ranch with horses and forty-five dogs. Before I had Emmett, I had dreams of joining the FBI, becoming a successful writer, remaining single and free forever, moving out west, and rock climbing everyday; before Emmett, I was well on my way to accomplishing most of these goals. Now, I dream of being the best mom anyone has ever known, being a positive influence in the lives of the children I care for, establishing healthy and wholesome friendships with other parents, growing in my marriage and as a person, becoming a successful writer, and finishing this damn thesis. My dreams have changed and become more complex and less straightforward, but they are all still achievable. I don't think it makes me a failure that I had to find new dreams once my old ones were no longer realistic. I think it means I matured and recognized that there are more important things in my life at this time; and, again, I'm learning to be okay with that.

#### **5. Nanowrimo is a great metaphor for life.**

Sometimes, in order to write 50,000 words in a month, you have to put other very important things (health, relationships, adult responsibilities, etc.) on the backburner. Sometimes, in order to strive for extreme and awesomely amazing goals, you have to set aside other important things like relationships, hobbies, and your health. Sometimes, all that hard work pays off and you end up with a beautifully crafted novel, or you become famous for achieving something no one else has achieved. But sometimes, 50,000 words—and goals that no longer

match your priorities—just aren't worth it; and I'm learning to be okay with that. I guess I'm learning to be okay with a lot of things.

## **Novel Excerpt: *Antevive***

### Prologue.

*Approximately 322 Antevive years ago, humankind had succeeded in exploring and colonizing every square foot of the tiny planet they had discovered not seven generations earlier.* With the human race came the desire to control every aspect of their existence, including all that flourished naturally around them. Trees hundreds of years old were cut down, and their seeds scattered. But before they could dream of rebirth, stone and concrete was laid, and a new kind of jungle took shape overtop of the once thriving lives of plants and animals. The color green vanished from children's vocabularies as it was replaced by black and yellow tape; the sun, constantly blocked by buildings and smog, seemed to become something of a myth—the subject of an old, nostalgic tale. The planet was smaller than the humans had expected, and they populated the earth much faster than calculated. Towns became crowded. More mountains were leveled. It took two days too long to circumnavigate the globe—too many bodies to trudge through. Tunnels were dug. More plants were uprooted. Pets ran out of places to relieve themselves. More animals were made infertile.

The Plague began, as would the flu. First, the children returned from school with fevers and chills. The parents felt ill only days later. A nasty bug to be dealt with by the doctors and scientists. A new shot was administered worldwide. They washed their hands and ran more tests. They volunteered for more trials and narrowed their options. They did everything right and continued to live their lives. Then they began to die. For ten years, infants refused to wake from afternoon naps and athletes ceased to resurface for that next breathe of air. In ten years, a population of nearly 2 million human beings dropped to a mere 200,000. Chaos could not begin to describe the resulting destruction. Every man, woman, and child—fending for themselves.



Oppressors rose to take their places among the ruins as ambassadors of order and peace. Nine tribes. Isolated, with few inhabitants. No more risk of conflict or communication. No chance of contact or expansion. Those areas uninhabited became places of horror and nightmares—venturing into them meant almost certain death. Humans were kept in check. Populations would never again increase as they did before the Plague—too many died on a yearly basis from the aftereffects, a debilitating fever. Humanity was back under control, and life on Antevive began anew.

## Chapter 1.

*“Addax Pereski, get down here right now! We need to collect the water buckets before the animals get to them. Are you listening to me? I said, come down!”*

Javelina Aster sighed impatiently as her eldest daughter slowly made her way down the thick vine that encompassed what remained of an ancient concrete ruin. At only ten years old, Addax somehow managed to find mischief wherever she went. Whether she was climbing rock formations or studying bugs, Javelina knew, if Addax wasn't in sight, she was probably getting into trouble.

For a long time Javelina had worried that Addax's odd nature was the result of something she had done wrong as a mother; but when the twins arrived they had fit in perfectly well, and Javelina simply worked from then on to remind Addax of her behavior in an attempt to reform her daughter. It was a slow and frustrating process, but Javelina loved her daughter and wanted her to have a bright future, so she persevered. Plus, those in the fields were almost certainly exhausted from Addax's adventurous nature, and if her daughter didn't stop asking so many questions they would undoubtedly be transferred. Still, Javelina believed Addax was making

progress. The excited outbursts at discovering something new came less and less often, and she had begun to show some interest in working the fields. Not to mention, Addax and her friend Lark had been spending much more time together away from the rest of the tribe—an occurrence fairly expected of children their age. Javelina was looking forward to the day her daughter would come of age and choose for herself a place in the tribe, as well as a future partner.

Her only remaining concern was that her other children would not make the same mistakes. Wren was her mother's daughter through and through; Javelina knew that one day she would contribute to the tribe in wonderful ways. Pygmy however seemed to be taking after his older sister more and more each day. When Addax would take off at the sight of a bee, Pygmy looked to almost burst with anticipation and longing. When Addax would ask a question, Pygmy would lean in ever so slightly in hopes of catching the answer. When she told a joke, he would cover his mouth with his small hands to conceal a giggle or smile. At least, Javelina thought, Pygmy had the decency and self-control to stay put and quiet like the well-behaved child Javelina knew he was. Her children would do fine—she never doubted this—they simply needed to be reminded now and then about their duty to the tribe and how to behave accordingly.

As Addax made it safely to the ground, Javelina gently took her daughter's left hand in her own and turned it so that their palms looked toward the sky. She smiled at her daughter before examining her hand.

"Please remember to wash this off," Javelina rubbed some dried mud off Addax's ring finger, revealing three small, black dots forming a triangle. "You know you need to keep this clean and visible. Now go get the bucket by the far mountain. Quickly now, and no stopping to explore. I need the water to boil the Filbert for the ceremony tomorrow."

Addax nodded curtly and took off in the opposite direction, heading for the mountain range only a mile away. Javelina watched her daughter go as she thought about how lucky they were to be so close to the mountains, which provided them with some of the cleanest water in the village. Some families toward the outer edge of the village had to walk hours or days to make it to these mountains; most resulted to catching the rain off of their roofs or simply leaving their buckets in the middle of a field or under a shrub. As soon as Addax disappeared into the thick brush, Javelina let herself smile—content—as she turned toward the near mountain in search of the smaller bucket.

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For someone so small, Addax was remarkably fast. She did not stop running until the tallest mountain blocked out her view of the sun. There she stopped, turned around, and smiled, proud of herself. She probably ran even faster than usual that day; she might even be able to beat her mother back to the house. Addax jogged the rest of the distance to the large water bucket and checked, as she always did, to make sure the plastic ring still sat secure around the rock formation that formed the boundary for her village. She didn't know why the boundary was there or who had decided this was the line that was never to be crossed; but when her father had led her out here to collect water for the first time, he had explained how important it was for her to stay on their side of the boundary line. Addax, of course, had had a million questions, but her father had simply smiled gently and rubbed the dirt from her ring finger and restated the rule. Addax's curiosity had threatened many a time since that day to step her foot just beyond the plastic ring, just to see what would happen. However, Javelina's stern tone always permeated Addax's thoughts just enough to prevent her from taking that chance.



Addax let her eyes scan the invisible boundary line as she sat on a rock next to her bucket. She always imagined the boundary line as a sort of wide arc, spanning from mountain to mountain, never letting her go past the tall mounds of earth that kept her from learning anything about what was just beyond the vast range. She tore a leaf from an aster that still had some dew collected on it and began to clean the dust from around the print on her finger that connected Addax to the rest of the tribe.

When she could clearly see all three dots again, Addax crushed the petals of the flower and began to use the paste to paint designs on the rock she was sitting on. She heard Lark before she saw him; despite living near them his entire life, it was as if Lark was visiting the mountains for the very first time whenever he came to find Addax after a rain. As Lark clamored over the last rock separating him from his best friend, Addax stood up to greet him. They hugged, and Lark came away with a cheek smeared with purple goop. Scraping it off in amazement and disgust, Lark picked up Addax's bucket and began to head back the way he had come.

"Sorry I'm late, I think I went the wrong way around the second mountain and it took me way longer than I thought it would. How did you make that paste? It's all sticky; my mom is not going to be happy if I come home with a sticky face. You're going to have to help me get the rest of this stuff off, you know. Are you even listening?" Lark replaced the bucket on the ground and turned to find Addax exactly where he had left her, still staring at the plastic ring that marked the edge of their village boundary.

"Aster," Addax answered without diverting her attention from the rock formation.

"What?" Lark wrinkled his nose as he always did when he was thinking or confused.

Addax called it his smelly face. "Like, your mom? What are you staring at?"

She answered evenly, but sounded rather annoyed by the distraction to her concentration that Lark was causing. "Like the flower my mother was named for. It's the purple ones. They symbolize fertility, which is why it's so convenient she had the twins; I guess our names really can decide our fate. I crushed the petals and mixed it with the dew that's still left from this morning. If I had more water I could make it less sticky, but Mom would kill me if she knew I had taken water from the bucket to make things." Before Lark could respond, Addax continued. "Do you see the ring? I think it may have moved. It used to be slightly up and to the left. Do you think an animal moved it? But why would they, that doesn't make sense. Maybe someone else uses this water spot. But then, why didn't they take our water bucket too?"

"People from Aridemais don't steal, Addax," Lark interjected. "Besides, the ring didn't move; you probably just remember it wrong." He once again started to move away, realizing she wasn't listening to anything he was saying.

Lark sighed and walked over to his best friend; he gently grabbed Addax by the wrist and gave her a not-so-subtle tug, effectively pulling her off the rock and into a standing position. She hesitantly followed, not taking her eyes off the rock formation, and tripped over the water bucket. As a result, about a third of the water splashed from the bucket, which finally snapped Addax out of her trance. Her eyes widened at the thought of Javelina's face after seeing a bucket that was less than full. This was the family's drinking water until the next rainfall. They didn't really need it to survive—the plants they ate provided plenty of hydration—but in the dry heat of Aridemais, a little water to wet the lips every once in a while was no less than a small miracle.

Cursing under her breath, Addax picked up the bucket and began walking quickly out of the mountains. Lark ran to catch up, offering to take the bucket.



“You can barely walk as it is, and I can’t afford to let anymore water spill. So thanks, but no thanks,” Addax spat the last words, angry at Lark for rushing her and causing her to spill the bucket in the first place.

Lark put on his smelly face again as he tried to keep up with Addax’s brisk pace, “Hey, don’t blame me, okay? I am just trying to keep you out of trouble. You know your mom doesn’t like to be kept waiting. Besides, I am supposed to look out for you. That’s what best friends do, right?”

Addax stopped suddenly and turned on Lark, spilling even more water from the bucket. “I know how my mother is, okay? I’m the one who has to live with her. That’s why I run here every day, so I have time to sit and think and just be myself without anyone lecturing me about my ‘duty to the tribe’ or how it’s ‘not normal for a tribe member of your age to be curious, Addax.’ I know. And I don’t need my supposed best friend to be reminding me of it every single minute. I can take care of myself, you don’t have to do it for me.” Addax continued to head across the open plains that separated the mountain range from her home.

Lark paused, shaking his head and contemplating going after her. They usually walked home together; he would sit and chat with Ms. Aster and play with Pygmy and Wren until it was time for him to go home for supper. Addax would walk with him halfway and then they would part, turning back every few seconds to wave at each other until both made it to their homes. They had been doing this for years; they had grown up together—Addax was only a couple months older than Lark—but recently Addax had started to grow distant. She spent more time thinking about the world outside of Aridemais instead of planning her contribution to the tribe like most children their age. Lark already had big plans for himself and the tribe, and he could hardly wait for his coming-of-age ceremony. But Addax refused to even speak about it, like it



was something she dreaded. It worried Lark that she seemed so unhappy as a member of the tribe, and he wished there was something he could do to help. In the end, Lark decided just to head home on his own. He figured Addax just needed some time to herself; plus, he knew there would be a fight between her and her mother, and he did not want to embarrass her further by being present for it. Without saying a word, he turned his course slightly and continued to walk, growing farther and farther from Addax as they walked in a narrow 'v' away from each other.

After a few minutes of silence, Addax realized she no longer heard Lark's clumsy footsteps behind her. She looked over her shoulder only to find an empty desert. Slightly panicked and confused, she turned in a full circle, looking for her best friend. She spotted him far off to her right, hands in his pockets and head down, kicking the dust as he walked. She thought about calling out to him, but decided against it. Feeling exhausted and angry with herself, she decided to visit Lark at his house after supper so she could apologize. Right now, though, she had to get home so her mother could scold her about the spilt water before it got too late; she didn't want her brother and sister to go hungry just because their mother wasn't finished lecturing. As the houses came into view, Addax picked up the pace, almost jogging into the quaint neighborhood. She slowed as she came to her house and took a deep breath before walking through the wooden doorframe and into her own personal hell.

Thankfully, Pygmy found her first. He ran up to greet his sister as he always did, hugging her tightly and kissing her lightly on the cheek. Wren skipped up a moment later, hugging her older sister quickly before eyeing the bucket suspiciously. She was definitely her mother's daughter. Addax stuck her tongue out at the younger girl; Wren rolled her eyes and walked back into the kitchen with an air of superiority no four year old should possess. Addax stood, the bucket in her left hand and Pygmy's smaller hand in her right. They inched their way into the

spacious kitchen—her father’s favorite feature of the house—and plopped the metal bucket onto the wooden table with a loud clang.

Javelina was standing at the counter, probably peeling the Filbert she was planning to boil for the ceremony the next day. At the sound of the bucket landing on the table she stood slightly straighter and turned slowly at first, then suddenly, to face her eldest daughter. The smile on her face seemed genuine enough, but Addax could not help but imagine what was actually going through her mother’s mind. Something about a homemade brainwashing machine to make Addax behave like a normal child, most likely. Addax smiled and exited out the other side of the kitchen into the living room, Pygmy in tow. She thought she heard Wren whisper to her mother; the word “water” reached her ear. With a sigh, Addax collapsed on the couch and pulled Pygmy into her lap, preparing to give her younger brother a full account of her day; a moment the two shared that meant a good deal to both of them. Pygmy smiled at her patiently; she smiled back, waiting for the inevitable. After a moment, Addax took a deep breath and began to talk with her favorite sibling.

“You’ll never guess what I had a dream about last night, Little Owl,” Pygmy’s tiny fists tightened in anticipation at his older sister’s words. “I dreamt that I climbed the tallest mountain of the range, all the way to the top!” She kept her voice low, but raised her arms above her head to emphasize the enormity of her feat. “So today in the fields, guess what I did?” Pygmy’s dark eyes shone in awe and wonder. “I planned my trip, of course! I thought about all the tools we would have to take with us, as well as clothing and food. We have to make sure we don’t run out before we reach the top. Turning around would be awfully disappointing, don’t you think?”

“Both of us?” Pygmy’s voice was barely above a whisper, so Addax leaned in even closer to answer.



“Both of us,” Pygmy smiled so big that Addax was afraid his face would get stuck like that. Before Addax could add to his excitement, Javelina’s calm but stern voice permeated the room.

“Addax, dear, could you come here please?” Addax leaned away from her brother and sighed. As she turned to stand, Pygmy’s smile faltered ever so slightly, making Addax almost want to give in to her mother’s unfair standards just so Addax could spend less time worrying about Javelina and spend more time with Pygmy. Almost.

Addax strolled back into the kitchen and met her mother, sitting at the table with the bucket off to her left. She was cutting Filbert now, separating the leaves from the nuts and the nuts from the seeds. Addax watched her hands move dexterously, admiring the time and effort her mother had spent learning and perfecting this technique. The moment ended though when Javelina’s hands stopped moving; she cleared her throat, a wordless instruction for Addax to look her mother in the eye. Addax smiled and met Javelina’s gaze with one of question as if to inquire about the meaning of this conference. Javelina, not amused, stood and pushed the bucket in Addax’s direction.

“Please put the remaining water in the storage. Then I need you to prepare supper for the twins. Wren collected a few flowers so if you could find a place to display them that would make her very happy. I am a little behind in preparing the Filbert for tomorrow so I need you to cooperate. Thank you, dear.” With a smile, Javelina sat and once again began to separate the parts of the plant.

Slightly confused, Addax stood in stunned silence for a brief moment. She opened her mouth to ask something, but she realized there was nothing to ask. Considering herself lucky,



Addax shrugged, picked up the bucket, and turned to leave the kitchen. As she rounded into the storage room, she heard her mother's voice calling after her with one more demand.

"And, Addax, since we seem to be low on water this month, I would ask you to refrain from drinking from the storage. So the twins can stay comfortable. It is supposed to be quite a hot harvest season. Thank you, dear."

There it was. The bombshell. Addax paused, took a moment to unclench her jaw, and answered as steady as she could, "Yes, mother. Of course." She hoped the malice she felt didn't seep too badly into her words. Or maybe she hoped it had.

No water? For a whole month? And during the harvest! Addax was steaming by the time she had gotten the twins sat down for their meal. After placing the flowers in a quaint arrangement in the center of the table, Addax grabbed an apple and the remainder of the loaf of bread and headed for the front door.

"I am going to Lark's house," she called out to no one in particular. "I'll be back to finish cleaning up before dark." Without waiting for a response, Addax closed the door behind her and began the short jog to visit her best friend. She knew she needed to apologize; she decided to offer him some of the bread as a peace offering. Lark probably would not still be mad at her. He was pretty used to Addax's tantrums.

As she drew closer to his home, Addax could not shed the anger she felt at her mother's "suggestion". Built up frustration threatened to explode out of her; at the last moment, Addax turned sharply and ran along the side of Lark's house before sprinting in the direction of the mountain range. She knew she had to apologize, but the conversation between her and Lark would only turn back to her mother, and the evening would end as rotten as it had begun. Instead, Addax decided to run it off. She ran as fast as she ever had, dropping the remainder of

the bread and focusing solely on the growing range in front of her. Addax reached the foot of the tallest mountain just as the sun dipped behind its summit. She sat on the same boulder she had painted earlier that day and continued to study the plastic ring at the boundary.

A short time later, after catching her breath, Addax hung her head and sighed. Standing again, and sure of her ability to keep her composure, she decided it was a good time to talk to Lark. As she turned to leave, Addax thought she heard a rustling coming from the rock formation. Afraid it might be one of the unfriendly animals that were found in Aridemais, Addax picked up a jagged rock and knelt behind the boulder. She watched as pebbles shifted and a gecko scrambled out from behind the formation. She rolled her eyes at the creature and dropped the rock.

As the gecko scurried behind the next boulder, Addax wasn't entirely convinced that she actually heard the gasp, but a moment later she definitely heard the tiny squeal originating behind the formation. Shocked into silence, Addax slowly approached the plastic ring she spent so much of her time contemplating. Without really think about it, she stepped around the formation and peeked into the small cave formed by three giant boulders.

There, on her hands and knees waving a flimsy twig at the gecko, was a girl Addax had never seen before. She was a teenager, thin, with long blonde hair—not unusual in sunny Aridemais. Addax simply stared for a few moments until the gecko ran off and the girl happened to glance behind her. She yelped so loudly that Addax recoiled in alarm, tripping over another boulder and landing squarely on the pockets of her homemade trousers.

The girl's face appeared over the boulder and she tilted her head in observation. Addax didn't move, only asked, "Who are you?"

The older girl responded with her own question, "Are you the one who sits and stares over here every so often?" Addax's face scrunched in confusion; did this girl sit here every rain day waiting for her to leave? "You know, it's not very polite to stare. Your mother should have taught you that. Let me see your finger print." The older girl seemed to have gotten over her temporary fright, because without hesitation, she strode over to Addax and stood over her, holding out her hand.

Addax slowly reached up and just barely placed her hand in the other girl's. The blonde pulled Addax up and flipped her left palm to face the sky. She began to rub dust off of each finger, starting with the pointer finger, moving to the middle, and finally ending with her ring finger as she uncovered the three black dots.

"Whoa, I like yours. You must be from over there," She jabbed her thumb over her shoulder in the direction of Aridemais. As she did, Addax noticed the five black dots in the shape of an 'x' right where the girl's thumb would meet the flowers as she smashed them to make paint. "Are you alone? You're pretty young, are you lost?"

This snapped Addax out of her silence and she answered aggressively as she yanked her hand away from the older girl. "I am ten years old, that is plenty old enough to gather water alone. My dad started doing it when he was only eight. Besides, I can take care of myself. You should go, though, before someone finds out you are on our land."

"Okay, okay," The other girl held her hands up in defense. I didn't mean to offend you. You sure are a feisty one. Look, let's start over, okay? My name is Holly; Holly Filbert. I'm from the village of Nosted, I am fifteen years old, and I am not on your land; you are on mine." She motioned then to the plastic ring wrapped around the rock formation that was previously her hiding spot.



Addax hesitantly followed Holly's point of direction and eventually saw that she was correct. Addax had unknowingly left Aridemais. She quickly sidestepped back across the invisible line and crossed her arms defiantly.

"Well, I am terribly sorry I entered your village. But if you don't mind, I must be going now. My mother is expecting me home before sunset," Addax didn't know what caused her to be so wary of the other girl. Maybe it was because she was older, or maybe it was because she had never met someone from another village before. Perhaps Holly's forwardness put Addax off; she had always been the curious one with too many questions, and now that someone had already taken that role, she wasn't sure how to respond. She began to back away, but Holly wasn't finished.

"Hey, wait! At least tell me your name. You seem pretty cool; maybe we could be friends. You come here often enough." She seemed sincere enough, waiting for a response.

"Um," the request of friendship had thrown Addax off guard. "My name is Addax. I live in Aridemais, and I really do have to get going. It was nice meeting you, hopefully I'll see you around." She turned and started jogging before the other girl could interject. As she went, she heard Holly call out one last question.

"What kind of plant is Addax?"

Rolling her eyes, Addax shouted back, "It's an animal!" Why did no one on this planet understand anything about names? Addax picked up speed as she raced the sun back to her home, smiling the entire way.

Addax did not utter a single objection as she tidied up the house that night. She swept the floors and used a little bit of water from storage to wipe down the counters. Once she was sure the twins were asleep, she told her mom goodnight and proceeded to bed herself. As Addax lay

staring at the ceiling and recounting the day's events, she realized she had yet to talk with Lark. She decided to visit him directly after leaving the fields the next day and fell asleep with more hope of excitement than she had in a long time.

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Sweaty and dehydrated, Addax gnawed on a hummel leaf, trying to wet her lips as she walked toward the quarry, where Lark spent his daylight hours. Her mother had just released her from her daily duties in the field and she was looking forward to meeting up with Lark. She saw him before he saw her; he was busy wiping down the stone that had been pulled out of the ground. When he finally looked up and saw her, Addax smiled and waved. Lark returned the smile as he wiped his dusty hands with the dirty rag, taking care to erase anything that may be covering the three black dots on his left ring fingertip. The friends talked for a bit, not mentioning the events of the previous afternoon; all seemed to be forgiven. Addax knew she was lucky to have a friend like Lark, and she couldn't wait to tell him about the girl she had met at the boundary. She waited patiently while Lark was dismissed and offered him the last bit of hummel as he walked up. He accepted gratefully, and they began the short stroll back toward the neighborhood.

"So, Lark, you will never believe what happened to me last night after supper. My mom punished me for losing the water by saying I wasn't allowed to drink from the storage for the whole month! During harvest!" Lark did not seem particularly interested, so Addax continued. "Anyway, I was going to visit you after supper to apologize and everything, but now I was mad at my mom and I didn't want to fight with you again, so I decided to go for a run instead. Well, I ran to the far mountain to check out the ring again,"

"Hey Addax," Lark interrupted.

“Uh, yea?” She really wanted to finish her story.

“Have you ever thought about what you want your contribution to be?”

Addax stopped dead in her tracks. She hated talking about the contribution, and Lark knew this. Her bubbly mood from just a moment earlier had vanished with one word, and she wished Lark would see this and leave it alone. When she didn’t answer, Lark turned to face her and continued.

“I mean, like really thought about your name and what you are supposed to do for the rest of your life. Have you ever wondered about your fate?” Addax followed Lark over to a pair of boulders where they sat, facing each other. A moment passed before Addax could answer evenly.

“Maybe, but I don’t know if I really believe in the whole ‘fate’ thing.” Lark’s startled look encouraged her to defend herself. “Like, I know we all have a duty to the tribe and I know that someday I will have to decide what my contribution will be. But I don’t like the idea of my name—chosen by my parents before I could even say Filbert—deciding my life for me, you know?” Lark’s smelly face told her he most definitely did not know.

“Well, I for one like the idea that our names are such a huge part of us. They make us unique, but at the same time they make us a community, a family; just like these,” he held up his hand, displaying the fingerprint that they all shared. “And it’s nice to believe that you can live up to this potential that our parents have set for us if we really try hard enough.”

“Yea, but what if I don’t want to live up to my name? What if I just wanna be me and not what my name wants me to be? I don’t know, Lark. Why are we talking about this anyway?” She looked up to find Lark gazing out into the distance, as if he was in his own little world.



After a moment, he confessed, "I think I know what I want to contribute. I want to lead the tribe. I want to be Chief." He wasn't looking at Addax when he said this, so he didn't see her jaw hit the sand before she hastily composed herself.

"The Chief?" Addax stood in the path of Lark's gaze, effectively breaking his trace. "Lark, you know what that means, right? It means going to the Edge and learning about what's out there. It means being in charge of like, a zillion people. It means *leaving*; your parents, your friends at the quarry, me." She tapered off as she realized how upset she was at the thought of Lark leaving, no matter how far in the future it may be. "Besides, we have years before we have to decide anything like that. You might change your mind before then."

Lark shook his head lightly, "I don't think so, Addax. I think this might be something that isn't going to change. It's what I want to do." He looked at Addax, pleading with her to understand and accept his words.

Finally, Addax relaxed and retook her place on the other boulder. "I believe you," she sighed. "I guess I'm just not ready to accept that you want to leave; I might never see you again."

"Of course you will," Lark said cheerfully. "We're best friends, they have to let you see me sometimes. And if they don't, well, I'll be the Chief; I can make new rules!" He smiled wide, a sign of his friendship and a promise that it would never change.

Addax returned the smile and they hugged. She knew that the ceremony was still seven years away—it seemed like forever. But at the same time, she had no idea what she wanted to contribute; and hearing Lark's confidence in his plan made her nervous that she never would. For now, though, they were content with just being best friends without worrying about their futures. Together they returned to the neighborhood and parted ways for supper, promising to see each other again the next day.

After supper, Addax realized that she had forgotten to tell Lark about Holly and crossing into Nosted. As she jogged the distance between her home and the boundary by the far mountain, she reminded herself to tell him next chance she got. Addax didn't like keeping things from Lark, especially after he had opened up to her about his contribution.

Holly was standing on the painted rock like a jackrabbit watching for predators when Addax jogged up. She jumped down, and Addax really got a good sense of the other girl's height for the first time. She wasn't too much taller than Addax—she could probably stand on the rock and be as tall as her. And she was really fit—Addax could see her muscle definition even in the dim lighting. Addax took in Holly's clothes too; they were homemade, as hers were, but they had designs in the fabric as well. It was much more interesting to Addax than her simple brown shirt and green trousers. The stitching of Holly's clothing did not end at the seams; it twisted and turned across the fabric. Addax felt a sense of freedom and spontaneity in the design, and she thought about asking Holly to teach her.

"Good to see you, Addax. I was afraid you weren't going to come back. Did you miss me?" Holly sat on the rock and picked an aster flower from the ground beside her.

"This is where I always come when I'm on a run. It had nothing to do with you. I was here first, so it was you who obviously were missing me," as she spoke, Addax wandered over to the rock formation that held the plastic ring and marked the boundary line between their villages. "Aren't you supposed to stay over there?" She challenged, pointing over her shoulder.

"Probably," Holly answered. But who's gonna make me? You?"

"And what if I did?" Addax responded defiantly.

"You won't. I am pretty good about reading people, Addax, and you are not someone to make another person do anything they don't wanna. And I don't wanna."



Squinting against the setting sun, Addax decided whether or not to call Holly's bluff. Who was going to see them way out here? Not even her mother came this far to collect rainwater.

"Okay, fine. Do what you want. But if we get caught, you're the one who's going to be in trouble."

With that being clear, Addax joined Holly and began to show her how to crush the aster with her thumb or a rock and how to add water in order to make it into paste and, eventually, paint. They then spent their remaining time decorating the rock and enjoying each other's company. Before the sun slipped behind the horizon, Addax grabbed as much hummel as she could carry, told Holly goodnight, and hurried back to help her mother tidy the house before bed.

The next morning, Addax stocked her pockets full of hummel, prepared the twins for day care, and joined her mother in the fields. When she was dismissed, she went to find Lark in the quarry, excited to finally tell him about Holly. As she waited for him to be dismissed, Addax sucked on her water plant and thought about how cool it was to finally have another young person to hang out with. She smiled at the thought of all three of them hanging out at the boundary line, talking about life and having fun. Lark threw in his rag, changed boots and started heading in Addax's direction as a thought came to her. Lark wouldn't want to make paint, and he wouldn't think crossing the boundary line was a harmless act either. He probably wouldn't even like Holly very much; he would probably say she just encouraged Addax to think about her duty to the tribe even less than she already did. The more she thought about it, the more Addax convinced herself that telling Lark about Holly was an awful idea. Besides, it might be nice to have an older friend who was a girl that Addax would be able to talk with for a change. As Lark finally met Addax at the edge of the quarry, her smile had faded slightly and she was focusing



very intently on extracting the water from the hummel in her hand. She offered another leaf to Lark and turned, starting the stroll home.

“So how were the fields today?” Lark asked.

“Not bad. We have a pretty good harvest this season. Mom thinks if we’re lucky that the neighborhood might get one and a half rations this month, so that’s always exciting.”

“No way! That’s awesome. Working at the quarry is so boring. Nothing ever changes, except sometimes the stones are bigger than my head and sometimes they are *way* bigger than my head.” Lark stretched his arms as wide as they could go and puffed up his cheeks, effectively causing Addax to burst out in a fit of giggles and resulting in a new game, where each friend had to try and come up with a funnier or more grotesque face. Their objective shifted into an imitation of the various animals found in Aridemais. First, Addax was herself, and then Lark pretended to be a jackrabbit. The game continued, both Addax and Lark enjoying themselves immensely, until they arrived back in their neighborhood, hugged each other goodnight, and parted ways for supper. After the twins were asleep, Addax would depart, take her run to the boundary, and recount the day’s events for Holly until the sun went down.

Their lives continued as such for some time: Addax and Lark did their work for the tribe, they grew in their friendship and love for each other, and they were happy. In the evenings or after a rain, Addax would head for the far mountain where she would meet Holly; the girls would learn more about each other and their tribes. They would find new ways to make paints of different colors; Addax learned to sew. Holly learned to farm. Addax still fought with her mother, but she no longer let it get to her; she accepted the fact that they would never see eye to eye, and instead focused on maintaining the good relationships she had. The twins continued to grow, Wren looking more and more like their mother and Pygmy taking after their father, just

like Addax. Her coming of age was the farthest thing from Addax's mind, and as far as she was concerned, her life could not have been better.

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"I'm going out to get the bucket, I'll be back to help with supper!" Addax pulled on her shoes and headed for the front door, where she met Pygmy, shoes already on and ready to go.

"I will be too!" Pygmy called out in the same way.

Addax smiled kindly at her brother and ruffled his brown curly head of hair. "Sorry, Little Owl, but you're not old enough to collect the rain buckets yet. Just two more years; don't worry, it will be here before you know it."

"But I'm not a Little Owl anymore," he insisted. "Now I'm a *Big Owl*!" Pygmy flexed his skinny arms as if to prove his point. "I can definitely do it."

"Hm...okay. I'll tell you what. If you can keep up all the way to the little bucket, I will let you go with me to get the big bucket at the far mountain. How does that sound?"

Pygmy almost squealed in excitement but was able to keep his composure as their mother rounded the corner. "Hey, mom. Addax said I am going to help her get the little bucket and then once I can keep up with that then I'll be allowed to get the big one too!"

Javelina looked at her daughter with slight amusement, "Is that so?"

Pygmy nodded so hard Addax thought his head would pop off. "Yep! Can I go mom, pleeeeeease?"

Addax smiled first at her brother and then at their mother. She and Javelina both knew there was no way little six year old Pygmy would be able to make it even to the near mountain and back, much less to the far mountain. It was unlike Javelina to allow any of her children to do anything unnecessary, but Addax was pretty sure she wouldn't tell one of the twins no.

“Alright,” Javelina sighed. “You may go. But don’t be too late. You have wash tonight young man.”

“Yes! I promise, we will be back super fast! Let’s go, Addax. I’m gonna beat you, let’s go!” Pygmy took off out the front door and began jogging in an oval, waiting for his older sister. This was probably the first time that Pygmy had been allowed to express his excitement without reprimand. The thought irked Addax, but she dismissed the feeling, allowing herself to feel good in this moment.

Addax turned to her mother. “I will go get the big bucket after I drop him off,” They both smiled. “I’ll be back to help with dinner but it’s rain day so I will probably spend some time with Lark after the twins are asleep, if that’s okay.”

“Of course, dear. Have a good time; Lark is a good young man. Don’t push him too hard,” she nodded in Pygmy’s direction. “Your little brother is quite ambitious. He reminds me of someone else at that age.” Her mother raised an eyebrow and Addax stretched a thin smile before turning around and heading out the door.

“See you later, Mother.” She gave a backwards wave before running up behind Pygmy, effectively scaring a squeak out of him. “Ready to go, Little Owl?”

“*Big Owl!*”

“Sorry,” Addax rolled her eyes. “Are you ready to go, Big Owl?”

Pygmy bounced up and down, his eyes squinting against the sun. “Yes.”

“Alright, then let’s go. Try to keep up, but don’t hurt yourself.” Pygmy wasn’t listening. He had already taken off in the direction of the near mountain, kicking up dust as he went. Addax shook her head and allowed herself a small laugh before jogging after her little brother.



The near mountain wasn't more than a quarter mile away from their home, but poor Pygmy didn't make it two hundred yards before slowing down and becoming noticeably exhausted. Addax had been keeping a pace equivalent to a slow jog for her; for Pygmy, who had never run anywhere in his life, it was like sprinting a marathon. He didn't stop though, which impressed Addax more than anything. By the time they reached the bucket, Addax thought Pygmy was either going to puke or pass out. Or both. She let him take a few small sips from the bucket and they laid in the shade of a pinyon tree for a few moments to let him catch his breath.

"You didn't do too bad, kiddo." Addax nudged Pygmy as they walked back toward the house. He graciously allowed Addax to carry the bucket home; something about not wanting her to feel left out of the experience.

"Thanks," Pygmy grimaced. "You know, I bet I am the youngest bucket collector in the history of Aridemais. And one day, I am going to be the best."

"Oh yea? Is that going to be your contribution? Official Bucket Collector of the Neighborhood."

"Of the Village!" They laughed and walked without speaking for a time. After a few minutes, Pygmy broke the silence. "What do you want your contribution to be, Addax?" Pygmy looked up at his older sister with admiration and genuine interest.

Addax sighed, "I don't really know, Pygmy. I have a feeling I will just end up working in the fields my whole life, like Mother. I just don't really see myself doing anything else. Not in Aridemais, anyway."

"What do you mean, not in Aridemais? You can't leave." Pygmy's small voice began to sound panicked.

"I know I can't," Addax reassured. "Which is why I will probably just choose farming. At least I am already good at it. I guess I could do sewing, but that's way too much sitting at one time."

Pygmy tilted his head a bit to the side in thought. "You know how to sew?"

"Well, I mean I could learn how," she tried to cover up her slip of the tongue. "I always thought it would be cool to know how to make our clothes. To go to the market and trade and that sort of stuff. But like I said, sitting still is not my thing." She smiled and Pygmy returned the favor.

"Okay, but what about our names?"

Not this again. "What about it, Little Owl?"

"Big Owl," he corrected. "And I mean, Mother says that our names can tell us what we are supposed to do with our lives; that they symbolize our destiny."

Addax scoffed, "Pygmy, you don't even know what those words mean."

"No, but I know what our names mean. Like, Mother's name means that she could have me and Wren, right? Because aster can make babies." Addax laughed at his innocent and superficial understanding of the importance the village placed on names and their meanings.

"And Wren's name means, what did Mother say, mature? What does 'mature' mean?"

"It's like, when you act older than your age. Like a grownup."

"Yep. That's Wren. She's always pretending to be Mother and boss me around." Addax chuckled at her brother's description of his twin sister. "And my name says that I'm going to be super strong! What does yours mean again? Mother said you were good at change."

"Yea, something like that." Addax could not believe she was discussing this with Pygmy, of all people. He was supposed to be the one who wouldn't badger her about all the talk of duty

and destiny. “Pereski symbolizes versatility. It means I can adapt—change—to different situations. So I guess she’s telling me I should do lots of different things; probably because she doesn’t think I would be able to focus on one thing for that long. She’s probably right.”

“Versatility.”

“Yep. Aster represents fertility—the ability to make life, basically. Palo symbolizes maturity and Saguaro symbolizes strength, like you said. But your name also represents a knack for hospitality, you know. So you could go that way as well.”

“A what?”

Addax laughed; their conversations were usually so deep, she often forgot Pygmy was more than six years younger than her. “A knack; it means a talent or ability. It means you are good at taking care of people and making them feel welcome. Maybe one day you will run the infirmary or maybe even the day care.”

Pygmy wrinkled his nose up in obvious distaste at the suggestion. “No way, I am going to be super strong and be the best rock breaker in the whole world!”

“Ha, okay, you can think that now; but you will get your chance to work in the quarry and I’m not sure you will have the same dream once you do. Lark hates it there. It’s really hard work and you’re sore all the time.”

“I won’t be sore, I will be super strong!” She simply shook her head and smiled at her brother’s confidence in his future dreams. He reminded her of Lark just as much as he reminded her of herself. “I’ll race you home!”

“Really?” The house was in sight, only a hundred yards away. “You think you can beat me?”



“Yep! You have to carry the bucket!” With that, Pygmy took off, leaving Addax in the dust and impressed with his clever wit.

Addax took off at a slow jog, catching up with the panting Pygmy at the foot of the front step to their house. “Good work, Little Owl. You ready to head out for the far mountain? A deal is a deal, after all.”

Pygmy’s eyes got large and round, making him look like the small bird he was named for. “You know, I appreciate the offer, but I think Mother might actually need my help here. I am the man of the house so I should really watch over the other girls...”

“Ah, yes, you are quite correct. We wouldn’t want to leave them home alone for too long would we?” Addax winked. Pygmy’s relieved expression made her smile. “I’ll be back before sunset!” She ruffled Pygmy’s hair one more time and left once again to make the trip to the far mountain.

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“Sorry I’m late, I took Pygmy on the near run today. He’s definitely going to sleep good tonight.” Addax looked up from cleaning her finger print to find Holly bouncing up and down excitedly on the freshly painted boulder. “What are you doing? You realize it’s a rain day? Lark is going to be here any minute, I thought we weren’t hanging out until after supper.”

Holly, unconcerned, jumped from the boulder and ran up to Addax, offering her a piece of bark; a crude drawing of what seemed to be a market booth covered it. “He left this on the rock. I think he used some of the pasty paint stuff we use to decorate the rock. It’s not too bad, really.”

Addax examined the piece of wood. Holly was right, it wasn’t a bad drawing. What was curious was why he used the paint. The friends had left each other messages lots of times—

pictures etched in the dirt with a finger or twig. But Lark disapproved of the paint; Addax knew this. So why take the time—and water—to leave this message with it?”

“Hello? Are you there?” Holly waved a tan hand between Addax’s face and the bark. “Don’t think about it so hard, he just went to the market. Which means,” She said, grabbing the wood and tossing it to the side, “we have all afternoon for me to tell you my news!” Still thinking about Lark, Addax allowed Holly to pull her over to the rock formation on the boundary; they sat and Addax shook her head, trying to focus on Holly. “I met someone today.” She waited for Addax’s reply.

“Okay,” Addax wasn’t sure what she wanted from her. “And...”

Holly rolled her eyes, “Not just someone, Addax, *the* one.” Nothing. “You know, my true love.”

Now it was Addax’s turn to roll her eyes. “Okay, so you met your future partner. I’m happy for you.”

“Hey, mister, just because you’ve known who your partner is going to be since you were born,”

“What??” Addax interrupted. “What do you mean? I don’t know who my partner is going to be. I’m only twelve!”

“Of course you do,” Holly replied matter-of-factly. “It’s Lark. You can’t honestly think you were hiding it very well.”

“Lark??” Addax recoiled in alarm and a touch of disgust. “Ew. No. We’re best friends, we have been since we were little. He’s not going to be my partner...”

“Whatever, I’m not going to argue with a little kid. He’s your future partner. But it’s fine I won’t bring it up if you don’t want me to.”

Addax almost interjected about her not being a little kid but decided against it since Holly had decided to drop the subject altogether. “Fine, so what’s this about your...true love?”

She smiled, pulling Addax down to sit next to her on the formation. “His name is Kudzu. He’s not from Nosted. Or Aridemais.” Holly paused, waiting for the information to sink in.

“Wait, if he’s not from here,” Addax looked at Holly with wide eyes. “Then that means there’s more. There are more villages and more people. How many do you think there are?”

“That’s what I thought too! But get this, he’s not from a village.”

Addax’s smile vanished. “What do you mean, he’s not from a village? What’s he from then?”

“He said he’s from a community. There are no boundaries, I guess. And he kept talking about things like, how they do not have an oppressor and none of them are dependent. I have no idea what that means, but I was super stuck on the fact that there might be more of us! Like, this planet must be huge! What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” Addax began to pace, thinking about Holly’s story. “I want to know what he means by an oppressor. We don’t have one of those, I don’t think. I mean, my mom really likes to follow the rules, but there’s no one being mean to us or forcing us to do things. And what does he mean by dependent? Dependent on what? I don’t know, Holly. This guy seems pretty weird. Did you check his finger print?”

“That’s the best part, Addax.” Holly got up and held Addax by both arms, stopping her from pacing. “He doesn’t have one.”

The girls spent hours talking about this mysterious man from outside the villages, Holly recounting his stories as she best remembered and Addax listening intently, growing more excited by the minute.



“Okay, so where did he say he was from?”

“He said they called it Kuqonda. He said that there were no oppressors there and that no one was dependent. I was so lost in his big, beautiful eyes that I forgot to ask anymore about it.” Holly began to daydream.

Addax’s grunt of disgust pulled her out of it, “Ew. I cannot believe you were flirting with him. He just comes along out of nowhere and the only thing you can think about is how cute he is? Despicable. We are talking about a possible paradise! No boundary? No finger print that’s a constant reminder of your duty to the tribe and no names that force you into a destiny you never wanted? Yes please. I may not know very much about this place, but if it’s out there, I’m going to find it. Where can I find this Kudzu fellow? I would very much like to talk to him.”

Holly’s face dropped at Addax’s request and she glanced down at the dirt as she spoke, “He’s gone.”

Addax’s heart stopped. “What? What do you mean he’s gone? When was he here?”

“He was only here for a couple days. One night. They came in on a raft and found me exploring near one of the mountains by the river. They asked me where they were and if I had any food to spare. I gave them some and that’s when Kudzu began to tell me all this stuff about oppressors and dependency and how it is his mission to spread the truth about Antevive so that one day everyone can be free to live together in harmony and peace.”

“Uh huh. Okay, a couple things. First of all, what’s a raft?” A shrug from Holly confirmed she was simply repeating something that Kudzu had said. “Got it; and what do you mean by *they*? How many of them were there?”

“Three. Kudzu and his parents.”

“Right, and they came in on the river?”

“Yes.”

“The river is water right? Like, a whole lot of it all in one place?”

Holly chuckled, “Yea, it flows all together and ends up in a lake somewhere in the middle of Nosted.”

“Okay, just making sure. What’s an Antevive?”

“No idea.”

“Alright, where did he go after you gave them food?”

She was silent for a moment before taking a deep breath and continuing, “I pointed his parents in the direction of the neighborhood, because I had no idea what they were saying but I figured at least one person could give them the information they needed. Kudzu stayed with me over in an abandoned mill by the river while we waited for them to return. When they weren’t back by morning, he decided to go after them, even though I insisted he stay. But he left; I waited for them all day but they never came back. I figured they had gotten the information they needed and moved on.” She said the last part with such sadness, Addax thought Holly may have been telling the truth.

“Okay. Well, why don’t we look for him? If he’s telling the truth, then there is more out there than what we have been led to believe. If he’s telling the truth, then this is definitely a place I want to get to.” Addax stood, hands on her hips like she was ready to stand her ground against Holly’s rebuttals. They were going to find Kuqonda, no matter what it took.

“Fine, let’s say I agree to go look for them. Where would we go? You can’t just come waltzing into the center of Nosted. Not looking like that. You’d be caught in an instant.”

“Looking like what?” Addax glanced down, trying to find what was wrong with her appearance.

“Well, first off, your clothes are all wrong.”

“Okay, then I will sew some designs in, like you taught me.”

“But they are made from different plants. And while we’re on the topic, your name is all wrong too. We don’t have animals here, and pereski doesn’t grow in Nosted.”

“That’s easy. You can give me an extra pair of your clothes and I’ll change my name. What’s a common name in your village?”

“Ivy. Everyone’s named Ivy. And your last name should be Filbert.”

“Isn’t that your last name?”

“Yea, most people have the last name Filbert. It’s like, our most important plant. We do everything with it. For most children, it’s the first real food they eat after being weaned from their mothers. Some people don’t like it or get sick when they eat it; those people are usually seen as weird and don’t really hang out in the squares and things. A lot of times, people who can’t eat it or don’t like it try to force themselves to eat it and a lot of them die when they are unsuccessful. Filbert is super important; we need it to live.”

“Wow, that’s crazy. In Aridemais, only adults are allowed to have Filbert. We have a special tea that my mom makes for our coming-of-age ceremonies and that’s when we try it for the first time. After that, it’s like, required at all social events. I think I’ve been it around it so much I’m going to puke once I turn seventeen and have to drink it for real.”

Real interest crossed Holly’s face, a rare occurrence. “Wait, so no kids ever get to have Filbert until you’re seventeen? I don’t think I could have survived that long without it.”

Addax shrugged, “I mean, we have lots of other stuff to eat and we just aren’t introduced to it as early as you guys are. Besides, we don’t have any river or lakes here so the only places we can get it is from markets. If we had to depend on Filbert for our survival, we would all



probably die. It is a huge part of our social stuff though, so I guess it's just important in other ways." Holly nodded, accepting that answer. "Anyway, back to the plan. I'll wear some of your clothes; my name will be Ivy Filbert; and I'll try really hard not to be amazed by the river."

"What about your print?" Holly nodded to Addax's hands as she held up her own. "Can't fake that."

"Hm." Addax sat once again, thinking hard. "I don't know, let's just make sure we don't get asked about it. Besides, what's the worst that could happen if they do find out I crossed the border? Tell my mother?" She paused. "No, you're right. That would be awful." The girls laughed and tried to think of all the punishments that would be worse than getting their parents involved as the sun ducked behind the mountains.

"Hey, you should probably go," Holly motioned at the setting sun. "You still have a bucket to take home."

"Oh, shoot!" Addax jumped up, running over to the bucket being careful not to spill a drop. "I was supposed to be home for supper!"

Holly laughed as Addax hobbled off, practically dragging the full bucket in an attempt to move faster without spilling any of the water. "I'll see you tomorrow!" She called.

"Yea!" Addax shouted over her shoulder. "See ya!"

As she started the walk back to the abandoned mill, Holly shook her head and smiled gratefully, happy that she had someone like Addax to make her days bright. And now, she thought to herself, she had someone to dream about at night.

~

Addax hobbled into her house as fast as she dared and emptied the bucket into storage. She ran into the kitchen to clean up what was left of supper and skirted to a stop to avoid ramming into her mother who was standing in the doorway.

“Oh!” Addax proclaimed. “Sorry, Mom. I got caught up; Lark went to the market today so I decided to go for a run and I lost track of time. I was just about to tidy up.” She tried to inch her way around her mother, but found her stare to be paralyzing. “I really am sorry. I wasn’t doing it to be rebellious or anything, I just...”

“You just what, Addax?” Javelina sounded tired and annoyed, like she was addressing an issue that should never have been an issue in the first place and is therefore the most tolling. “You just thought that because you are the oldest and because your father isn’t here to enforce the rules all 420 days of the year that you can just walk all over me and do what you want? You just believe that you should be allowed to neglect your duty to the tribe and ignore your friends and family in order to act like a child?”

Addax stood her ground, looking her mother in the eye, “I made a mistake! I said I was sorry, what more do you want?”

“I want you to behave like any normal child of Aridemais would! I want you to perform your duties, spend time with Lark, fetch the water buckets, clean up after supper, and nothing else. No more going for runs. You will collect the buckets on rain day and you will come back. You will spend time with Lark either here or at his home. He doesn’t have time to go running around anyway; he is preparing for his contribution, much like you should be. You need to get these ridiculous ideas and questions out of your head and begin thinking about something conventional to contribute to your tribe.”

“But, Mother! That’s not fair! I love the mountains; and I run to clear my head, it’s the only way,”

“I said,” her mother interrupted with a step toward Addax, closing the distance so that she was completely looking down on her daughter. “No more.”

Addax fought back tears and bit her tongue, wondering what the point was; she didn’t see anything else her mother could possibly take from her at this point.

Javelina interrupted her thoughts. “Also, I don’t want you telling stories to Pygmy anymore. They were fine when he was younger, but you are both much too old to be focusing on anything other than your duty to this tribe. Do you understand?”

Addax could not even look her mother in the eye; she did not want her to see how hurt she was, how utterly defeated she was. She had taken away her mountains—except for once a month—her alone time with Lark, every escape from the monotonous routine that was her life. And now, she had officially closed off Pygmy to her as well. She might as well say goodbye to her bubbly little brother, so full of life. If Javelina wasn’t letting them have their time every day, he was already a goner, already lost to the will of the tribe. Her younger brother who reminded her so much of her father; and of herself. Addax wouldn’t even be able to recognize him as her Little Owl anymore in a couple years. And she hated her mother for it.

As Javelina walked past her daughter, she added one more thing, barely above a whisper, “I love you, Addax. I know you will do what’s best for the tribe.” Addax didn’t move as her mother made her way back to the bedroom her parents used to share. Only when she heard the door click shut did she collapse into one of the chairs and let the tears fall.

~



For the entire month, Addax did as she was told. She didn't ask questions of the workers in the field; she hardly spoke at all. She only left the house to meet Lark at the quarry or his house, where they would leave to take a walk around the neighborhood and go nowhere else. She made supper for the twins and tidied up the house in the evenings. She avoided Pygmy's questioning eyes when she sent them to bed without a story. She could barely stand the day when, only a few days before the new month, Pygmy had gone straight to bed without even a glance in his older sister's direction. As she lay in bed that night, staring at the ceiling, Addax held her hand in front of her face, examining her print. A single terse laugh escaped her lips as she realized it had never been cleaner. Her mother would be proud.

~

The trip out to the far mountain took longer than usual, and Addax found herself incredibly winded when she finally spotted the metal bucket sitting next to the familiar round boulder. The colors of the paint had faded; she wondered how long it took Holly to realize she wasn't coming back.

"Nice of you to show up today." The sound of her voice startled Addax, and an immediate sense of dread and guilt encompassed her.

"Holly, I'm sorry. My mother, she..." Addax realized her excuses were pointless. She had let Holly down. The only friend besides Lark that she ever had and now she would lose her on top of everything else. Hanging her head, she grabbed the bucket by the handle and headed toward her house, making an effort not to look back.

"Well, this is way less fun than fighting. I guess I would argue with a little kid after all. It's good to see your face, even if it is way too clean. See you next rain, Addax. Try to get here faster next time, I think you're losing your touch." As she listened to Holly's footsteps fade,

Addax thought she felt a small hint of a smile threatening to form at the corner of her cracked mouth.

## Chapter 2.

*Three years passed quickly.* Addax and her mother hardly spoke with or even looked at each other anymore—but at least they were no longer fighting either. Addax and Lark, however, spoke almost every day. They learned more and more about each other as they grew together, and Addax was constantly amazed by how close they had stayed through the years—no thanks to her, she realized. She admired his strength when he worked to pull stone from the ground; and she admired his intelligence when he spoke of his ideas for the village as a part of his future contributions to his tribe. She knew she was so lucky to have a best friend like Lark, and she thought often about what Holly had said to her that day at the far mountain so long ago. She decided that having Lark as a partner wouldn't be such a bad life after all. It would make her mother happy, so maybe she would still be allowed to see the twins. And maybe, she thought, she could learn to be happy here as well.

The only part of her childhood Addax missed was Holly. Pygmy, who was now ten, had begun collecting buckets almost the exact day he turned eight, so Addax no longer had a reason to visit the far mountain; or Holly. Even before Addax had lost her very last freedom, Holly had been showing up at their meeting spot less and less. It took a few months for Addax to realize that, as she had grown, aged, and matured, so must have Holly. Addax knew that Nosted did not view contributions to the tribe the same way that Aridemais did, but she figured that Holly had to have returned to her life as a contributing member of her own tribe, nonetheless. No more painting, no more stories of the utopia. Addax could now almost believe that the entire ordeal—

the stories, the plan—had been nothing more than a wonderful dream of a naïve little girl. She missed Holly, but she wished the best for her and was able to imagine her friend as happy in her adult life.

One morning, as the sun was beginning to rise, Wren came into the kitchen as Addax was preparing a meal. “Good morning,” Addax greeted her.

“Hey, Addax,” Wren asked, concern in her tone. “Pygmy’s not getting up right away. Will you check on him to make sure he’s okay? He might just be tired, but even then if you could get him up and ready for the day I would feel much better. I wouldn’t want him to be late for the quarry.”

“Yea, of course,” Addax squeezed her younger sister’s shoulder; she was growing up so fast. “Are you feeling all right?”

Wren simply nodded and moved to the counter to finish preparing the meal. She was definitely her mother’s daughter. And yet, Addax knew she was different in her own special way. She knew the words to say and the motions to go through in order to perform her duties to the tribe; but underneath, Addax saw the concerned glances at her twin brother whenever he returned exhausted from the quarry—a ten-year-old little boy trying to take the place of a father he never knew in a home that needed so much more than what he could provide. And she saw the younger girl smile whenever Pygmy whispered a not-so-subtle joke into her ear. Addax knew that the twins shared a deep bond, and it made her happy to know that under the perfect shell, Wren was still a kid—a kid with impeccable manners—but a kid, nonetheless. She was proud of her. She was proud of both of them.

Addax knocked lightly on the wooden doorway leading into the room that the twins shared. At the end of this year—only a few months away—Wren would move in with Addax in



order to begin reflecting on her role as a woman within the tribe, away from the distractions of Pygmy, a boy, who just happened to be her twin. Pygmy was laying on his back, head fallen to the side, resting on his shoulder. Addax smiled, wishing she didn't have to disturb his peaceful slumber. She knelt down beside her younger brother and grabbed his arm, gently shaking it in an attempt to rouse him.

"Pygmy, hey Little Owl, it's time to get up. You have a duty to perform." She knew, if he were awake, he would respond, insisting that he was not a little owl. She also missed saying snide comments about the village's policies that someone besides her would actually appreciate.

A few moments passed and Pygmy still didn't stir. She felt the skin beneath his dark bangs and noticed he was warm, so she tucked the bed sheet in tighter around his thin frame. Wrinkling her brow, Addax returned to the kitchen and grabbed a cloth. She walked into the storage bin and dipped the cloth in some water before wringing it out and carrying into the twins' room. Wren walked in as Addax placed the cloth gently onto their brother's forehead.

"Stay here and watch him," She instructed Wren, keeping her voice steady and calm. "I'm going to go see what Mother wants us to do. He has a fever; if he starts to shiver, take the blanket off of your bed and cover him. I think he will be fine, but he will need a few days rest. I don't remember the recipe for the medicine so I will get that from Mom as well. Also, when Lark arrives for breakfast, tell him where I am and that Pygmy won't be at the quarry today. He will explain to the overseer." She turned to exit the room, running her fingers through her long hair. Before she left, she called to Wren, "Are you alright?" Her younger sister nodded as she calmly pulled up a chair next to Pygmy's bed and stared intently at his restful form.

Addax returned from the fields with a list of ingredients tumbling around in her brain. She walked through the front door and into Lark, who was just leaving to head for the quarry.

“How is he?” She asked him.

“The same. Still sleeping. We covered him with another blanket just in case but he doesn’t look or feel cold. You don’t think...”

“I have to go tell Wren these ingredients before I forget them. Excuse me, Lark.” Addax pushed past him, refusing to think about the next words that were going to fall from his mouth. “You are welcome to join us for supper tonight. I probably won’t be able to meet at the quarry today, though. Some of these I’m pretty sure are only available at the market.”

Lark smiled gently and gave Addax a quick hug. “I understand. Don’t worry, he’ll be fine. I’ll see you tonight.” He pulled the door closed behind him as he headed off for his daily chore.

Shaking her head and refocusing on remembering the ingredients, Addax joined her sister next to Pygmy, whispering to her each ingredient in succession.

“It’s supposed to rain tomorrow, so I will have to get the buckets. Either you or Mother will stay with Pygmy and the other will have to go to the market to get the ingredients that we don’t have in the neighborhood.”

“I’d rather go to the market. I can’t stand sitting here and looking at him all day. I think I wiped down the entire kitchen twice just while you were gone. I feel like I need to be doing something to help, you know?” The way Wren looked at her big sister made Addax think that maybe they were related after all.

“Okay, I’ll let Mother know. And I’ll ask Lark to go with you so there will be nothing to slow you down. Plus, Mother will be much more willing to let you go if Lark goes with you.”

“That sounds good. Thanks, Addax.”

Addax smiled and stood, heading for the door. “He’s going to be alright Wren; don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried,” There’s the Wren she knew.

“Good, because there’s no reason to be,” as she walked down the hallway to put on her shoes, Addax hoped with all her might that she would not be proven wrong.

The run to the far mountain was filled with emotion for Addax. The joy she felt at returning to the familiar rhythm of her feet pounding the dirt and sand was overshadowed by her worry at Pygmy’s current condition. Memories of Holly did not enter her mind until the rock came into view. And only after she stared at it longingly for a few moments did she realize that it had been decorated with freshly painted designs. Some were experienced and careful; others were rough and seemed to lack any order. It had to have been done recently; the rain would have washed away anything done before last night. Had Holly been there? Addax turned quickly in a circle, searching for the girl—woman—she wasn’t even sure she would recognize anymore; she lingered for a moment longer on the rock formation and the plastic boundary ring that still hadn’t moved. Feeling foolish, Addax shook her head and reached down for the bucket handle.

“Addax?”

She straightened and dropped the bucket, her back to the familiar voice that called her name. Slowly, Addax turned and faced Holly who had just walked up around the rock formation. Standing next to her, holding her hand, was a little girl. Her hair was blonde—slightly darker than Holly’s—but her eyes were a silver-grey, a color not at all common in Aridemais. Her tiny right hand was almost completely covered in purple goop. In awe and wonder, Addax’s eyes met Holly’s.



“Addax, I’d like you to meet my daughter.” She knelt down and pulled the girl close, “Juniper, this is my dear friend, Addax; she’s the one I’ve been telling you about.”

Without hesitation, the little girl—Juniper—ran over the boundary line and directly into Addax’s leg, effectively wiping much of the paint on her trousers. Addax reached down and placed her hand on Juniper’s back, still staring at Holly.

“How?” She struggled to find the words. “When? How old is she?”

“I’m three-years-old!” Juniper answered proudly.

“Almost three,” Holly gently chided.

Addax quickly thought back on the last time she saw Holly. “But, if she’s four, that means you...” She took the little girl’s hand and took a step toward the older girl. “Holly?” “The juniper plant doesn’t grow in Nosted, Addax. I learned about the tree four years ago when a man and his parents told me of a place outside the villages; a place without oppressors or dependents.”

“Kudzu? But you said he was only here for one night.”

“One night; the night he stayed with me in the abandoned mill.” Addax was silent, trying to digest all the new information. “She was born two months before the end of the year. I couldn’t leave as often, so I stopped making the trip here. As she got older I started to tell her about you and Aridemais, and eventually about her father. We began walking here after the rain and found that another young boy was now collecting the bucket.”

“My brother, Pygmy.” Addax cringed slightly as she thought about her younger brother laying in bed unmoving.

“Oh, I see. Well, he was confused by the rock, so we only painted right after the rain so it would fade by the time he got back. I think she’s getting pretty good, don’t you think?” Addax

nodded, taking in the small girl who led her over to the rock formation and pulled her down to sit next to her. "I'm really glad you came back."

"I didn't," Addax finally took her eyes off of Juniper and looked at Holly. "Pygmy is sick. My sister, his twin, and my...friend, Lark, are going to market to find ingredients while I collect the ones around here and get the water. Once he's better, he will start collecting the buckets again and I will return to the fields until my coming-of-age ceremony. After that, I will probably never see these mountains again." She added after a moment, "I'm really glad to see you. And you have no idea how happy it makes me to be able to meet your daughter. She's beautiful." Juniper crawled up into Addax's lap and hugged her tight. "I really have to get going though. Pygmy needs the medicine." She began to stand, replacing Juniper on the makeshift seat.

"Addax," Holly countered. "There's one more thing. The real reason we came today." Addax stared in frustration and concern. "We need your help. The mill was found and we can't stay there anymore. Juniper trees don't grow in Nosted and she doesn't have a fingerprint. If we are found..." Holly didn't finish, only found the ground with her eyes waiting for Addax to respond.

Addax's eyes grew wide and her mouth fell open at this incredible turn of events. "Wha-, what do you mean you can't stay in the mill? Why don't you just go home?" Holly didn't answer, and Addax stared, putting together the pieces in her mind. Why Holly had been so willing to cross into Aridemais but seemed scared out of her wits when Addax suggested venturing into Nosted; it hadn't been about Addax at all. Or how Holly had just happened to be at the mill when Kudzu and his parents found her. It wasn't a vacation spot for her and her daughter, "What about your parents? Don't you have a home in the neighborhood? Friends? Anyone."

“Just you,” Holly spoke barely above a whisper. “I don’t know my parents or where I am supposed to be in the neighborhood. They dropped me off at day care one morning and then never came back; at least, that’s what people told me. Someone different took me home every night, made sure I was fed, and then took me back to day care the next day. They had a sort of rotation going. It was like that until I got too old for day care and then no one knew what to do with me so they just sort of pretended I didn’t exist. I thought about finding them once I understood my situation more fully—my parents I mean—but I had no idea where to look. Eventually, I just started walking. I didn’t tell anyone where I was going; I didn’t actually know. They probably figured I had just wandered into the Wilds and died. I probably would have, but I guess I picked correctly and ended up on the border of Aridemais instead. I found the abandoned mill and sort of set up shop. I learned how to find and prepare Filbert and I just sort of survived. Until we met; then you know the story from there.” Holly picked her daughter up off the formation and held her close.

“But,” Addax could not find the words.

“You’re all we’ve got. I don’t expect you to take us home and make us a part of the family. We just need a place to hide until they lose interest in the mill.”

“Holly, I,” Addax looked at her friend with a plethora of emotions plastered on her face. “I have to take care of Pygmy, and I have to focus on my contribution, and...” She sighed. “Alright, I can hide you for awhile. You’re going to have to learn how to hydrate yourselves without water. If you have a bucket I can show you where to put it to catch the most water from a rain, but it’s rarely enough to last all month, especially when you are used to having an abundance of water. Also, I won’t be able to get you Filbert.”



“Don’t worry about that, I know how to find it. There is plenty relatively close to the border. Juniper doesn’t eat it, so she will probably enjoy all the new plants you can introduce to her. I’m pretty unfamiliar with what else there is to eat, so she’s only been really surviving off of what I can find and convince her to try; mostly it’s the plant she was named for.”

“What’s that?” Addax now understood how important Filbert was in Nosted—if you didn’t eat it, there was little chance of you being aware of anything else to eat—and she was astounded that Juniper had made it this far. She wanted to be angry with Holly for keeping so many secrets, but Addax knew she was hurting and in need, and she could hardly blame her; Addax had been living two lives since she could run.

Holly interrupted Addax’s thoughts with her answer, “Hummel.”

Another shock. “What? But Hummel is an Aridemais plant. Why is she named after a plant from my village?”

“I let her try it one of the first times we were here and she loved it. Hummel is one of the only things she will eat.”

“But, you can’t survive off of Hummel, it’s all water!”

Holly rolled her eyes as if this was obvious and hardly a concern, “She eats other things, Addax. Hummel is just her favorite—and her first—real food. Therefore, her name.”

Addax shook her head, her thoughts swirling around in her mind at a thousand miles per hour. How had this happened? Four hours ago she was preparing their morning meal and contemplating her life after coming of age. Now she was back at the mountain she thought she would never see again, speaking with the woman she had all but mourned, taking her in along with her daughter, who she didn’t know existed. What was more, her brother was sick and she had no idea if she would be able to make him better. This was more excitement than Addax had

experienced in four years. She was afraid that if she thought about it for too long, she would realize she had missed it.

Holly once again drew Addax from her thoughts, “We really appreciate this, Addax. We know how crazy this must be for you; I know you will take care of us. Thank you.”

Addax took a deep breath and smiled, “You’re welcome. Everything will be fine. I have to take this water back home, but I’ll be back as soon as I can with some more solid food if I can find some. Aridemais is going to be an adjustment for you. Think you can handle it?” Addax smirked, lightening the mood and taking them back to a time when they were both kids, planning to find a magical land with no worries, when the scariest thing was whether or not they would beat the sun home.

“I think I’ll make it,” Holly laughed, and Juniper’s wide smile made Addax almost glad that she had returned to the mountain that day. If only the circumstances had been different.

~

Pygmy woke up three days later, hungry, thirsty, and exhausted as if he hadn’t slept in days. For the next three weeks Javelina, Wren, Addax, and Lark spent every free moment by his side, coaxing water and tea down his throat. They would take turns collecting ingredients, going to the market, and performing their duties to the tribe.

Somehow, Addax still found time to visit Holly and Juniper in order to bring them supplies and company. Addax would listen to Holly tell Juniper stories about Nosted and Aridemais, and occasionally Kuqonda, as she gathered various plants she would use to try and make the tea more effective. Juniper continued to paint—Holly was right, she wasn’t bad at it—and Addax grew fonder of her everyday. She had good reason to believe that the feeling was mutual. Juniper would often join Addax, helping her search for ingredients, and Addax had

caught Juniper multiple times trying to make dots on her left ring finger with paint. She had already mastered the five dots in an 'x' on her right thumb. Juniper was special in a lot of ways, and it made Addax sad to think of all she was missing out on by being confined to such a small area when she should be out learning about her world. When the rain came, Addax showed Holly how to place the bucket under a spring that flowed off the mountain so that it would catch the refreshing water. Juniper started experimenting in the bucket right after the rain, seeing what sorts of twigs or leaves would float in the water. Addax was both intrigued and amazed as well as annoyed that Holly let Juniper play in their drinking water. She tried to remember that it wasn't her business.

A week after the rain, more than a month since the ordeal had begun, Pygmy's fever broke. He was able to sit up and began to eat more solid foods. Javelina almost cried with relief and Wren finally let herself breathe properly, sleeping all the way through the night for the first time in a month. Addax and Lark celebrated by taking a night for themselves. They visited the rocks that they had many a conversation on as kids and took some time to enjoy the cool evening. After a few moments Lark broke the silence.

"Hey Addax," She looked at him, and for the first time in a long time, she actually *saw* him. She saw his strong jaw, constantly set firmly in concentration. She saw the power in his muscles, toned from years of working in the quarry. She finally landed on his eyes, the eyes that had watched her age throughout the years. Every growth spurt, every tantrum, every excited bound and pestering question. He had watched her all her life; he probably knew her better than she knew herself. And she was just now seeing it.

"Yea?"



"I know you probably don't want to talk about this, but since it looks like Pygmy's getting better and everything, I was wondering if you had decided about your contribution yet. I don't want you to get mad or anything, I know it's been stressful. I just don't want you to forget and then be upset when it comes time for you to declare, you know. I mean, it's only two months away."

Addax sighed. She had been thinking about it. Every night, after her mother and sister had gone to sleep and Lark had returned home, Addax lay staring at the ceiling thinking about what she was going to do. Her entire life she had avoided the topic, refusing to think about her contribution in the hopes that the reality of it would simply go away. But it didn't. Lark was right, she needed to figure it out.

"I think I want to run the day care," She wasn't sure why she said it. Of all the possibilities she had discussed with Holly, that had never been one of them. But after meeting and spending time with Juniper, Addax thought maybe it would be something she would enjoy; especially once she wasn't able to see them anymore.

"Really?" Lark sounded both shocked and impressed. Addax nodded. "Wow. Well, I think you would be great at that! You took care of the twins for their whole lives so you know what you're doing."

"Do you think the kids would like me?" Addax enjoyed that the conversation had yet to turn tense.

"Are you kidding? You're so vibrant and full of energy, what's not to love about you?" As soon as he said it, Lark blushed and looked quickly away, suddenly finding great interest in the sand under his feet. "I think you'd be awesome. In my humble opinion." He smiled and

nudged her with his shoulder. Addax returned the gesture and they continued to sit facing the quarry.

“Do you still want to be Chief?” Addax finally asked.

Lark shrugged, “Yea, I do. I was talking to my dad about it though and he said it’s like a huge process to get up that high. I would basically be old by the time I got to do anything cool.”

Addax laughed at Lark’s smelly face; she hadn’t seen that in way too long. “But, hey, I figure it’s worth a shot. If I never make it, at least I have some cool stories to tell.”

“When have you ever been interested in telling stories?” Addax asked accusingly. Lark didn’t answer, only stuck out his tongue. They laughed and continued to chat until the remaining light started to fade. When they got back to the neighborhood, they parted ways, waving as they returned to their homes until they could no longer see each other through the dark.

Pygmy slowly got over the mysterious illness and regained his strength by joining in the collection of ingredients—they continued to make the tea as a precaution. He would be returning to the quarry any day now, but Addax continued to collect the bucket for the next two months so as to ease Javelina’s mind about Pygmy running that far. Addax was perfectly happy with the arrangement. Sneaking out to see Holly and Juniper was much more difficult on days when it didn’t rain, so being able to see them without worrying about getting caught, even if it was only once a month, was a luxury. Somehow, though, she managed.

Two months later, Addax was on her way back from the far mountain with the bucket. She had brought Holly some new fabric to make clothes for Juniper, who was growing quickly, as well as some more foods and different plants for Juniper to try. Like every rain day, Addax took the bucket into the storage room and emptied it, checked to make sure rooms were tidy, and rounded into the kitchen to begin preparing a meal. What she should have realized was that today

was not just any other rain day. As she rounded the corner, she was stopped short by her mother sitting at the kitchen table.

“Oh!” Addax cried out in alarm, “Mother, hi. Sorry, I didn’t expect you to be sitting there. Is everything alright? Do you need me to make more tea?” She started for the counter where they kept the ingredients.

Javelina reached out and lay a gentle hand on her daughter’s arm, “No, no, nothing like that. Everything is fine dear. Won’t you sit and just talk with me?” Confused, Addax slowly pulled out a chair and sat, facing her mother with an inquisitive look. “Now, I know everything has been...hard around here with your brother being ill. Things have been all topsy-turvy and I just wanted to thank you for all your help. I also wanted to let you know that with all the commotion I have not forgotten about your big day coming up.” Javelina smiled gently.

“Oh,” Of course, Addax hadn’t forgotten either—as hard as she had tried—about her ‘big day.’ In only two weeks she would come of age, and that meant choosing and announcing her contribution to the village. It also meant choosing and announcing a future partner—a prospect even more unnerving. Addax, of course, knew exactly who she would propose; it seemed that Holly had been right, it’s not as if she had ever had any real choice in the matter. Still, it didn’t make the words any easier. “Right, of course not,” She finally answered. “I know you’ve been crazy busy and worried; I knew you wouldn’t forget.” Unfortunately. She had been avoiding it her entire life, but in two weeks, there would be no more deflecting or whining. Two weeks until this life ended and the new Addax Pereski—the obedient, dedicated-to-the-tribe Pereski—would take its place.

“Well, I know I couldn’t possibly be more excited than you are,” she was, “but you must understand that, as the eldest, this will be a very special time for our family.”



“It’s too bad Dad isn’t here to see it,” Addax ventured.

Javelina continued as if she hadn’t heard. “So I was wondering if maybe you would like to talk about the contribution you are going to choose?”

Addax sighed, “Yea, well, I think I decided on...”

At that moment, Lark walked in, saving Addax the trouble of finishing. “Hey, Addax, I was wondering if you would maybe like to talk a walk,” He stopped when he saw Javelina and blushed when he realized he had interrupted something. Addax smiled sheepishly, silently thanking him. “Oh, sorry Ms. Aster,” Lark atoned.

“I thought I told you to call me Javelina, Lark. And it’s perfectly fine. You know you are always welcome; you are practically family,” Addax and Lark shared a quick glance. “Addax was just about to tell me about her contribution. Go ahead dear.” Lark took a seat next to his best friend and Addax took a deep breath.

A knock at the door cut her off yet again. Addax exhaled sharply, hanging her head and closing her eyes. She wanted to stall, but this was just excessive. It took her a moment to realize how strange the situation was. When she finally came to the conclusion, she looked at both her mother and best friend, both of whom had already made the connection, as evident by the looks on their faces. No one knocked on their door because the only people who ever came to the house were those who were invited. And those who were invited did not have the need to knock. So the knock could only mean that the people at the door were unknown and uninvited. A rare occurrence in Aridemais. An ominous one.

Javelina and Lark stood together, Javelina heading for the door while Lark hovered protectively beside Addax. Once Javelina was out of sight, Addax slowly stood and pulled Lark over to the counter so they would seem to be doing something menial and productive. She

handed him a bunch of Filbert and told him to start separating the parts. Lark had no idea what that meant, but didn't argue and instead got busy pretending to be busy. Every couple seconds, Addax would look at Lark and Lark would look over his shoulder toward the front room. It felt like an eternity before Javelina made it to the door and opened it with a cordial, "Hello, can I help you?"

Addax heard the faint gasp and turned to face the unknown threat—she wasn't even sure if there was one, she realized, but for whatever reason, she felt defensive. Lark turned as well, both of their backs against the counter, as a man and a woman they had never seen before strode into the kitchen as if they owned it. Leading the way was a creature unrecognized by either Lark or Addax. It stood on four legs, its back standing three feet off the ground, with dark brown fur, a long snout and pointed ears. Its muzzle was wet with drool, and its sharp teeth were bared in the teenagers' direction.

"Wha-, What is that?" Addax voice shook. She lived in Aridemais; she knew every animal in the village—her father had taught her all about each and every one of them. But she had never seen the beast standing in front of her at this moment, which could only mean one thing; it wasn't from Aridemais. Which meant neither were its handlers. "Who are *you*?" She questioned, more confident.

"My name is Mela. This is my partner, Lygodi," when the female stranger spoke, it was as if the room had frozen over. Addax shivered, a sensation she hadn't experienced since she had gotten stuck out in a rain when she was seven years old. "This is our guide dog. We are looking for someone; perhaps you could help answer a few questions." Addax got the feeling that they weren't asking.



At that moment, Javelina reentered the room, skirting around the strangers and their dog and joining Addax and Lark by the counter. "I'm terribly sorry, but may I ask why exactly you are here, in our home, with this...creature?" Addax could tell Javelina was irked by these strangers simply barging into their house without explanation, and it both fascinated and terrified Addax that her mother was having to hold her tongue.

"As we previously explained to the children, we are looking for someone," Lygodi stared at Addax as he spoke, as if he were accusing her of some unknown crime.

"Well, then by all means, tell us who it is you are looking for, and we will be glad to help point you in the right direction. I am sure you will have better luck outside," Javelina tried to motion for the front door, but the strangers held their ground.

"They would be wearing something like this," As she spoke, Mela held up a simple shirt, one that everyone in the village might wear. When she turned it slightly so the light from the sun hit it just right, Addax saw that, spread across the fabric in delicate swirls, was a pattern made with the thread usually used only for ensuring the seams stayed tight. A piece of clothing not found within the boundaries of Aridemais. Addax's jaw involuntarily hit the floor, and she quickly worked to compose herself. She wasn't fast enough. Lygodi made eye contact with her, and the creature at his feet tugged at the rope holding it back.

Javelina's brow wrinkled in confusion, "I'm sorry, but I have never seen a piece of clothing of this nature. We do not make shirts like this in Aridemais. You must be mistaken." She once again attempted to guide them out of the kitchen. Once again, they ignored her attempt. This time, the dog snarled in her direction, and Javelina shrank back against the counter defeated.

"We do not believe this person is from Aridemais. We believe this person may have crossed about three months ago the boundary between here and a village known as Nosted; it



meets with your village near the far mountains. Are you aware of the possibility of any such occurrence?"

"No, of course not, that's absurd!" Javelina stood straight, regaining her courage at the thought of someone accusing her of breaking a rule. "Here in Aridemais, we understand the importance of one's duty to the tribe, and no one in this village would ever hide something of this magnitude that could possibly danger the unity of the tribe. Besides, my only son has been sick for quite some time and has only recently become well enough to return to his duties. As you can imagine, the entire family has been very preoccupied with this. And Pygmy would have mentioned if he had noticed something out of the ordinary while collecting."

"Collecting what, exactly?" All attention was now focused solely on Javelina.

"Why, the water bucket, of course. We keep one over by the far mountain. As the man of the house, Pygmy is in charge of collecting the buckets after the rain. He has never mentioned anything about the sort of thing you are implying." Javelina was getting annoyed and quite offended at the interrogation, especially now that the attention had drifted to her little boy.

"And while the boy was sick?" The strangers seemed to be leaning in, eager for Javelina to miss a beat or give away information she was not meaning to.

"His older sister collected it for him; she did it often when they were younger, after their father left and before Pygmy was old enough to go on his own. But Addax never saw anything either; she is a good girl, she would have said so, wouldn't you dear?" They all turned to find that the space previously occupied by Javelina's oldest daughter was now empty. Addax was gone.

Both Lygodi and his dog snarled. Lark wasn't sure which was more terrifying. Mela turned for the front door. Lark, trying not to focus on how he felt, hurriedly ran between the two strangers and turned, holding his arms out and blocking their path out of the kitchen.

"Wait," Lark wasn't sure what his plan was. "Um, won't you stay for some Filbert tea? We, um, we know you came such a long way and, uh, we wouldn't want you to leave without having gained something useful. Right, Ms. Aster?" Javelina raised an eyebrow, not catching onto Lark's meaning. She was just happy they were getting out of her kitchen and was confused at why Lark was insisting they stay longer.

"She knows something. Where did she go?" Mela squared herself against Lark, looking him straight in the eye; she hadn't fallen for his ruse.

Javelina, finally understanding, stepped in. "What do you mean, she knows something? Are you accusing my daughter of lying and endangering the tribe? I will have you know, Addax is an obedient young woman who would never break such an important rule," Lark would have smiled if the circumstances had been less dire. "She is coming of age in less than two weeks and she is going to contribute wonderfully to this tribe. To even think she would know of the things you speak of without telling someone..."

"Then why did she run?" Lygodi growled.

"Well," Lark offered. "First of all, your...dog, thing. It's terrifying. No one around here has ever seen anything like that and then you bring it in here all mean and snarling, that would scare a full-grown man. How can you blame her for not wanting to be in the same room with it?"

"Yes," Javelina added. "And she has been very stressed of late, trying to care for her brother and contemplating her contribution. Why, it would be enough to make any young girl feel..."

At that moment, Pygmy and Wren returned from their duties at the fields and quarry, having picked each other up as Addax and Lark had done for so many years. “Hey, Mom,” Pygmy called from the front room. “Wren and I were wondering if we could help with the Filbert for tomorrow! She’s gonna teach me how to,” He stopped abruptly as he took in the scene in front of him. Wren gasped and took a step back, half hiding behind Lark as Pygmy ducked under his arm, his eyes on the dog. “Um, Mom, what exactly is going on?”

Mela answered instead, “We are looking for your sister. Have you seen her?”

“Of course he hasn’t seen her,” Javelina answered indignantly. “They are just returning from their duties and Addax is most likely in her room, collecting herself.”

“Actually,” Pygmy began hesitantly. “We just saw her. She was running toward the near mountain. I figured she was gonna go ahead and pick up the bucket for me. Why, what’s going on?” The strangers didn’t answer, only pushed past both Lark and the twins and busted out the front door. Lark and Javelina looked at each other in alarm. “Mom, what’s happening? Who are those people?”

Without speaking, Javelina grabbed the twins and pulled them into their room. Lark immediately took off out the back door. He wasn’t as adept at navigating the mountains as Addax was, but he hoped that living there his entire life would give him at least a small advantage over the two scary strangers and their hairy beast. Though it was one of the hottest days of the year, Lark shivered at the thought of the creature’s dripping jaws full of razor-sharp teeth. He ran faster as he thought of it finding Addax before he did.

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Addax slid into the cave on the side of the far mountain where Holly and Juniper had been living for more than three months. Out of breath, she immediately began to roll up the



makeshift sleeping pads and shove their belongings into sacks Holly had brought from the mill. Holly and Juniper came into the cave moments later, Juniper giggling over something Holly had said. When she saw Addax, Juniper shouted with glee over the early return of her dearest friend. Addax didn't even stop to acknowledge the little girl, only kissed her forehead and immediately addressed her mother.

"We have to go. Now." She grabbed the two sacks and stood, handing one to Holly as she pushed out of the cave.

"Excuse me?" Holly grabbed Juniper's hand and followed Addax out of the cave, taking a final glance at the empty space they had eaten a meal in only hours before. "What do you mean, we need to leave?"

"They found you," Addax searched the horizon frantically, listening for any sound of the two strangers or their dog.

"What? What do you mean they found us? Who are 'they?' Addax, what's going on?"

Addax turned sharply on Holly, "I mean they found you! I have no idea who they are or how they know who you are, but they know you crossed the boundary, they know you have been living in Aridemais in secret, and they know I'm the one who's been hiding you. And they are coming. Right now. So we have to go."

Holly didn't move, "Addax, we can't just go! Do you even know what you are saying? That's crazy. Why don't we just hide out here until they get tired of looking? Then, we can,"

"Then we can, what, Holly?" Addax was tense, trying to keep herself from yelling in case anyone was close enough to hear her. "Then we can find a new cave, a new mill, a new village? They have this weird dog-creature thing that I'm pretty sure they are using to track you, Holly. They found your shirt, probably in the mill. Now they have my scent. And my family. They

aren't going to get tired of looking. They are going to find us. And what do you think will happen when they do?" Holly didn't answer. "We aren't kids anymore, Holly. This isn't a plan to run around in each other's villages for a day in order to find your one-night stand. It's not a fun story about a utopia that you whisper to your daughter every night as she falls asleep. They are coming for us, Holly. All of us. And if they catch us, they are going to do a lot worse than tell our parents. Is that what you want? Is that what you want for her?" Addax pointed at Juniper, now cowering behind her mother's leg. Silence.

Addax returned to scanning the desert, trying to think of the best possible escape route. She had just decided on the mountains when she heard footsteps approaching from her right. She turned to run when the familiar voice reached her ears.

"Addax!" Lark stumbled, out of breath, into the space between the mountains. "Addax, what are you doing? Why did you run? They are right behind me; that dog, it's like it knows exactly where to find you. I don't think they saw me; I needed to find you so I could help explain to them what was going on. I," He froze when he saw Holly and Juniper, standing slightly behind Addax as if they were under her protection. He closed his eyes and shook his head, as if they were a hallucination he was trying to make go away.

"Lark," Addax started.

He stared directly at her, his eyes full of pain and accusations. "What did you do?"

Addax took a step toward her best friend, her hands held out, begging him to listen, "Lark, please, you have to understand,"

"What is there to understand, Addax?" He took a step back, refusing her gesture. "They're right. It is you. You, you lied to me?" He said like a question; like her denial could make it all go away. "How long...who...what," He couldn't decide on the next sentence, the hurt

and shock he felt jumbling the thoughts in his mind before they made it to his mouth. He finally settled on, “Why?”

He wouldn’t get his answer. As Addax opened her mouth, they heard the barking of the dog; every second, the sound grew louder and more menacing. Panicked, Addax took a final apologetic look at Lark and turned, pulling Holly behind her as she took off behind the mountain. As they disappeared from sight, Lark contemplated chasing after them. For reasons he could probably never explain, he instead stood there and watched them go. In anger and confusion, Lark kicked the dirt at his feet. As the dust settled, he noticed the little girl had dropped something as she left; a small flower. He picked it up. It was an aster, bright purple, the sun shining off its petals as if praising its beauty. A tear escaped his eye as Lark crushed the flower in his hand before turning and running back toward the neighborhood, letting the broken petals fall to the ground.

Addax ran as fast as she could, dodging rocks and shrubs and plants as she went. Every so often she would stop and listen for the sound of the people pursuing her and wait for Holly and Juniper to catch up. She had no idea where they were going or where they would end up, only that they were heading away from the neighborhood—away from Lark. After what felt like an eternity of running, Addax could still hear the barking as the dog followed them. But now, she could hear something else as well, a sound she’d never heard before. It sort of sounded like someone sighing incredibly loudly; every so often it sounded like the rolling thunder that signaled the start of a rain. But it was constant, and getting louder as they ran. Perplexed, Addax focused on the sound, turning to run in the direction she thought it was coming from. The next time she stopped, the sound was incredibly loud and she realized that it was lots of sounds, all



mixing together to create a beautiful and powerful melody. She waited for Holly and Juniper to catch up and they all rested, listening to the sound.

“It must be right on the other side of this mountain. What do you think it is?” Addax looked to Holly, who was handing Juniper some hummel.

She shook her head, “I’m not sure. Sometimes it sort of sounds like the river right after a rain; like the crashing is sort of the same sound that the water makes when it hits the bank.”

“Do you think it’s like, a giant river?” Addax asked excitedly.

“I hope so,” Holly sighed. “I am dying of thirst.”

It took them a moment to realize that the only sound they were hearing was the mysterious one. Addax strained to capture the sound of the dog and its masters pursing them, but heard nothing.

“I think we lost them,” Addax offered.

“Or they gave up,” Holly leaned back against the side of the mountain and closed her eyes. “The sun is going to set soon.”

Addax scanned the sky and, seeing that she was right, began to look for a cut out in one of the mountains that they could stay in for the night. There was a small overhang off to her left, so she stood up and carried her pack under it. There weren’t really any walls, so it would be chilly in the night wind; but at least they would be covered if someone looked down from one of the surrounding mountains. Holly and Juniper followed her lead and soon all three sleeping pads were out and they had begun collecting fuel and kindling for a small fire.

“Okay,” Addax examined the pile of bark and shrubs they had been able to find. “The plan is to make a fire to warm up our little area and go to sleep while we are still warm. Our body heat should do the rest. We have to put the fire out before dark so that they are less likely to

see the smoke and follow it here.” Holly nodded and they set up their fire, making a pit with small stones scattered around the foot of the mountain. As they finished, Addax stopped suddenly, staring at their pile of wood.

“What’s wrong?” Holly asked.

“I didn’t think about bringing matches.” She sat back on her heels and hid her face in her hands.

Optimistic, Holly said, “Okay, so we will just start it without matches.”

“I don’t know how.”

After a moment, Holly responded. “Well, doesn’t it have something to do with rubbing sticks together or something?”

Addax looked up, “Maybe.”

For the next hour, the girls took turns rubbing two pieces of bark together, watching intensely for a spark or even some smoke. As the sun dipped behind the mountain and the temperatures dropped, they accepted failure and crawled feebly into their pads. Juniper was shivering fiercely, so Holly pulled her in so they were both in one pad. Embarrassed, angry with herself, and cold, Addax closed her eyes and fell quickly asleep to the sounds of rolling and crashing coming from the other side of the mountain.

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“Addax!” She awoke to the sound of her name being called from somewhere in the distance. She rolled over to check on Holly and Juniper only to find that their pads were empty. She bolted up, frantically looking around. “Addax!” It was Holly’s voice. Addax scrambled out of their makeshift room and ran in the direction of Holly’s call on the other side of the mountain. She slowed when her feet hit the sand. At least, that’s what she thought it was. Holly had

explained sand to her once as super fine, light dirt. She said there was a little bit on the bank of the river she grew up by. This was more than a little, though. She looked up and down the edge of the mountain range. Addax thought it must have stretched for miles; so much bigger than they had grown up thinking it was. She turned her attention back to Holly and looked up to find her standing a little ways farther out, facing the largest body of water Addax had ever seen—the *only* body of water she had ever seen. She searched for the horizon only to find that the water didn't end there. In all directions, she could see nothing but the water, a beautiful blue carpet sparkling in the morning light. Behind her, the range seemed just as vast.

"Holly," Addax said barely above a whisper. "Is this what your river looks like?" Holly shook her head without speaking. They watched the water roll, grow in size, and crash against the shore, listening to the wind sweep across the waves.

"It would be one big river, that's for sure." Holly looked down at her daughter who was kneeling in the sand, running her hands through the fine tan powder and letting it run through her fingers.

Addax slowly approached the water and stood as close as possible without letting it touch her shoes as it lapped against the sand. She squatted and reached out. The next wave that rolled in, she stretched to catch some of the water in cupped hands. The water was clear but full of sand. She let the water drain and brushed her hands together to rid them of the sand.

"We can't drink this. The sand mixes in with the water when it gets close enough to catch it."

Holly tilted her head to one shoulder, deep in thought. "Well, to get water from the river back home, you have to collect it right after it flows over rocks so that it's clean. Sometimes, we would wade out closer to the middle where it was clearer."



Addax nodded. "Let's go pack up our stuff and come back here. We can eat and start walking that way," She pointed to her left. "When we find a place with rocks, we will work on collecting some water to drink. We have plenty of hummel, but I would kill to try some of this water."

"No kidding," Holly agreed. "There's so much of it, how could anyone resist? Come on Juniper, let's go get some food."